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"One line of footprints leading to the body—and none returning . . . and yet it was murder . . . as I am a living soul."

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THREE OWLS EDITION

Q. E. D.

A Mystery Story

BY

LEE THAYER

Author of "The Unlatched Door," "The Mystery of the 13th Floor," "The Sinister Mark," etc.

W. R. CALDWELL & CO.
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To

E. H. C.

IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT THIS
BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

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Q. E. D.

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CHAPTER I

The Missing Guest

"WELL, it sure is good to have old Red-top playing around with us once more, isn't it, Mother?"

Harrison Carlisle stood with his back to the broad open fireplace, luxuriously warming his khaki-clad, woollen-stockinged legs. He was a short, rather thick-set young man with a bronzed face to which a pair of twinkling, light blue eyes, a short, broad nose, and a rather long, smooth-shaven upper lip gave an expression of careless, quizzical good humour.

His relationship to the old lady who stood beside him was apparent to the most casual observer, though she was very much stouter than her son and had none of his negligent looseness of carriage. She was, in fact, so upright and had such an enormous bust and other architectural features that she always gave the effect of preceding herself into a room.

At her son's words she turned her smiling, wrinkled old face toward another young man who was drawing

her comfortable winged armchair nearer the fire and regarded his pleasant, freckled Irish countenance with twinkling approval.

"Mr. Clancy knows how welcome he always is here, Harry," she said, in a cordial voice, surprisingly youthful in tone. "He doesn't come nearly often enough. You know you have been working too hard, Mr. Clancy. It's about time you were taking a rest."

"Well, I am going to take a real rest this time, Mrs. Carlisle," replied the young man, leaning on the back of the chair which he had placed to his satisfaction. "I haven't been fishing with Harry for years and I can't imagine a greater rest than that, especially if we let him go down the stream first. We won't any of us have the bother of landing anything. . . . We'll get a lot of experience, and Harry'll get the fish," and he laughed boyishly.

The old lady seated herself in her chair and drew her knitting out of the side pocket, glancing across the wide, cheerfully lighted room to a tall old clock which stood in the corner.

"I think you boys ought to get started pretty soon," she said. "It's nearly eight o'clock and it's a long drive up to the Club. The roads won't be any too good, either. I don't quite like your going up at night, Harry."

"Oh, there'll be a moon, Mother, and with this light snow on the ground we'll be able to see per-

fectly. It'll be a good thing for the driving; not too deep, and as smooth and white as a blanket. I hate to see it coming so late, though. Suppose the trout'll know it's April first and come out and be caught? Old Red-top's going to be awfully disappointed if he doesn't get any fish after I've dragged him away out into the wilds of northern New Jersey, and after all I've said of the fishing up around the Club, aren't you, old sport?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Clancy, laughing. "It'll be such a change for me, messing around in the woods with nothing on my mind."

"And catching fish instead of the wily crook?" grinned Carlisle.

"Oh, cut that out, Harry," exclaimed Clancy, feelingly. "Let's forget it for a while. I don't want to remember for the next few days that there's a thief or defaulter or any other kind of a criminal in the world. That last case of mine nearly put me on the blink. I worked on it for three days and two nights without a wink of sleep, and hardly a thing to eat."

"That was the Allison emerald case, Mother," interrupted Carlisle, eagerly. "We read about it in the papers. You remember? Our good old Red-top was the god in the machine, and we never suspected it, did we?"

"No! You don't mean it!" cried Mrs. Carlisle, dropping her knitting and leaning forward in her chair. "The papers spoke of the clever work of a firm

of private detectives, but I didn't realize—— Oh, I wish you could tell us the whole story, Mr. Clancy. It was such an interesting case."

"Mother is simply nuts on detective stories, whether real or imaginary," laughed Carlisle, patting the old lady's shoulder, "and so am I. That's one reason she's so keen about you, old Red-top. Ever since Peter Clancy began to make his mark in the annals of crime I think she's been glad we went to school together. I never ask a bunch of men out here that Mother doesn't suggest my inviting you——"

"But that isn't the only reason, Harry," said the old lady, with dignity. "Mr. Clancy knows, I'm sure, that I like him for himself."

"Of course I do, Mrs. Carlisle," said Clancy, heartily. "Don't you let him tease you. You've been just bully to me always, and I'd love to tell you all about the Allison emeralds, but I'm afraid we haven't time this evening."

"No, we haven't," exclaimed Carlisle. "We ought to be moving now. I wonder what's keeping Kent. Seems to me I could have changed my clothes twice since dinner." He crossed the broad, low room and stepping out into the hospitable-looking old hall, called up the stairs: "Rob! Oh, Rob! Aren't you almost ready?"

"In a minute," a voice answered, and Harrison Carlisle came back into the room.

"He'll be ready in a minute," he said, with a jerk

of his head in the direction of the stairs, and added, in a slightly lowered voice: "Sorry to ring in a perfect stranger to you on this party, Clancy, old chap, but Kent's been after me for a long time to take him trout fishing, and when I met him in town the other day he said he'd heard I was taking some fellows up to the Club for the opening day, and asked if he could go along. You'll find him a pretty good sport, I think, though I don't know just how he'll be in the woods. I've been out for tarpon with him down in Florida, and he's all right at that. Mother thinks he's too much of a fancy dresser to be a real good sportsman."

"I never said anything of the kind, Harrison," the old lady interrupted, indignantly.

"No," grinned Carlisle, "but I saw you looking at him all through dinner. Oh," he broke off as the door bell rang, "that must be Louis Hood at last. I'll let him in," and he started toward the hall.

Before he had reached the door of the big long room, however, a silent-footed Japanese manservant, in a white jacket, passed it and opened the front door. Followed a softly spoken word or two and the quiet, inscrutable-faced servant returned, bearing a small package on a tray. All of his movements were of a silky smoothness. He presented the package to Harrison Carlisle, who stood nearest, and silently withdrew.

"Package for you from the drug store in the

village, Mother," said Carlisle, glancing at the label. "Shall I put it here? I thought," he added, advancing into the room, "I thought Hoki wasn't here, Mother. Why didn't you have him serve dinner to-night instead of Louise? He does so much better."

"I know, Harry, but I have to give Hoki a day off now and then," remonstrated Mrs. Carlisle. "I know you hate to have one of the maids wait on the table. I thought Hoki would be back in time. But he was late and I don't like to say anything. He's very expert and very faithful, and it's hard to get or keep servants, so far from town."

"Oh, it's all right, old dear. Don't you bother," said Harrison, affectionately. "Here comes Kent at last, and I'll bet he is arrayed like one of these. Come in here, Rob," he called as a step sounded on the stair. "We're in here by the fire, waiting for Louis Hood to show up. I wonder what's keeping him."

"Hasn't he come yet?" asked Robert Kent, entering the room, hurriedly. "I thought you were waiting for me."

He was a small, thin man of indeterminate age, dressed very carefully in an extremely complete and polite sportsman's outfit. Compared to the rough old clothes worn by Carlisle and Clancy the effect was somewhat amateurish. He advanced toward Mrs. Carlisle with a smile which showed his beautiful, even white teeth, and spoke in a drawling manner

with slightly exaggerated courtesy. In appearance he presented a sharp contrast to his friend Carlisle, and Peter Clancy wondered what the two could have in common. Not much besides the love of sport, he decided, and even that attracted them differently, it was plain to be seen.

"I think we have to thank you for the best dinner that was ever eaten in all the State of New Jersey, Mrs. Carlisle," Kent was saying. "It was a fine preparation for a cold drive."

"I'm with you there," said Clancy, heartily. "Too bad Mr. Hood had to miss it."

"You did expect him to dinner, didn't you?" asked Kent, turning to his host. "Are you sure he's coming? It's getting late for starting."

"Oh, he'll show up all right," said Carlisle, easily. "Trust Louis Hood not to miss opening day if he had to break the ice in the brooks. He's over at his mother's. . . . Funny," he broke off, "I can't get used to calling it anything else even though the dear old lady's been dead since last fall. Anyhow, he had to stop and pick up his tackle and change to fishing clothes. He 'phoned me from town that he couldn't get here for dinner, but he'd be over soon after. He ought to be here now!"

"I should think, dear, since it's getting so late," said Mrs. Carlisle, glancing again at the clock, "that you'd better drive over for him. You said he was walking over here, didn't you? His shortest

way is to come by the road, and you couldn't miss him."

"Isn't she the bright child!" exclaimed Harrison, wagging his head at his mother and reaching over to pat her cheek. "You might think she wanted to get rid of us, but it isn't that at all. Her mind's just full of those speckled beauties we'll be after to-morrow. Come on, fellows! Mother's got the right idea. No use fooling around here any longer. We'll pick Hood up on the way." He leaned over and took both of the old lady's hands, drawing her to her feet. "Come out and see us off, Mother, and wish us luck, and we'll bring you back the finest mess of trout you ever laid your eyes on."

"Yes, wish us luck, Mrs. Carlisle," laughed Clancy. "It'll do us more good, I know, than any number of four-leaved shamrocks!"

Laughing and talking, they had all reached the hall. The Japanese butler glided out from the shadows, helped the men on with their coats, and threw open the front door. An able-looking closed car stood ready in the drive at the foot of the steps.

"Wish you were coming with us, old dear," said Harry, stooping to kiss his mother, who laughed with the hearty *camaraderie* of a girl.

"I'd look well wading a stream at my time of life, wouldn't I, Mr. Kent?" she said as she shook his hand. "No, Harry, my son, your old mother can still cast from a boat, thank Heaven, but that's the

best you can expect of her now. Good luck to all you boys, and good sport! And," she added, in a lower voice, drawing Clancy's red head down so that she could speak in his ear, "you get on the stream first, and keep ahead of Harry. He gets plenty of fishing all the time. It's only fair."

"What are you plotting with old Red-top, Mother?" called Carlisle from the depths of the car where he was placing his beloved rods so that they would ride without injury. "If you have secrets with Clancy, Rob and I are going to be jealous, aren't we, Rob? Here, you get in at the back, old man. Does that leave room enough for your legs? All right. Get in front with me, Red-top. All set? Ready, on your mark! Good-bye, Mother; take care of yourself. I'll 'phone you from the Club. We ought to make it by ten, or a little after. Good-bye, dear!"

The car door slammed, the starter buzzed, the engine took hold with a will, and the big car rolled smoothly down the white drive.

The old lady turned back into the warmed and lighted house with a smile and a little sigh. Her eyes met those of the inscrutable yellow-faced servant.

"It's hard to have a tired old body," she said, half aloud, "when one's spirit's still young, isn't it, Hoki? Oh well"—she drew a long breath and spread out her plump, gentle old hands. "You can lock up now,"

she continued, "and go to bed. I shan't need you any more. Good-night, Hoki."

The quiet Japanese bowed low, with a polite and deeply respectful hiss, which was his nearest approach to speech, and silently departed.

CHAPTER II

One Line of Footprints

IT WAS not a long drive from the hospitable Carlisle home to the old Hood place on Fernwood Road, though the road was steep and winding. It ran mostly through woods and shrubbery, and skirted large estates that comprised the rich, semi-suburban village of Fern Hills.

The light snow which had fallen earlier in the day had now completely ceased, and the rising moon was slowly and leisurely ascending the heavens through drifting scarfs of cloud.

The two great eyes of the car shone ahead with a brilliant glare and the three sportsmen looked eagerly out on all sides for the fourth man who was to complete the cheerful party.

"Something must have happened to detain Louis," said Carlisle more than once as they drove swiftly along. "Wish we'd thought to 'phone that we were coming for him. But that's just like me. I always go off half cocked. Never mind; we can't miss him. He's sure to come this way. Oh! here——" The car slowed down and almost stopped, as the light fell on the single figure of a

man walking swiftly toward them at the side of the road.

The man threw up his arm to shelter his face from the blinding glare of the lights.

"Hello, Louis, is that you?" called Carlisle, as they drew alongside. "We thought you were never coming and—— Oh, I beg your pardon!" he broke off, "I mistook you for——" The rest was lost in the increased noise of the engine.

The man in the road said nothing, and went quickly on his way.

"You chump!" said Peter Clancy, laughing. "That man was a foot shorter than Mr. Hood. Couldn't you see? And he had no rods or anything in his hands."

"Oh, I didn't notice," said Carlisle, easily. "Doesn't matter, anyway. We're almost there. This is the beginning of his drive," and he swung off the main road into a broad driveway covered with an almost unbroken sheet of pure white snow and bordered with a thicket of rhododendron from which tall pine and hemlock trees rose, whispering softly in the mild southern breeze.

The shadowy drive ran smoothly westward, curving in and out among the trees and shrubbery, and in a few moments the three men descried the dim bulk of a long, low, old-fashioned house looming dark through the branches.

"Not a light," murmured Harrison in a slightly

worried tone. "I do hope we haven't missed old Louis on the road. Don't see how we could, though." And "Honk—H O N K!" his horn spoke as they swept up to the foot of a wide, open terrace which ran across the south end of the house.

They waited a minute, but as there was no response from the dark house, Carlisle remarked impatiently: "We'd better ring the bell and make sure he isn't here before we turn back. Hop out Clancy, old chap, and let me through. We'll soon see."

Clancy had flung the car door open and was already standing on the shallow step of the terrace. Carlisle leaped out and ran up the steps. Peter followed more slowly. Kent contented himself with merely opening the rear door in readiness for Hood, in case he should still be there, and waited, listening to Harrison's impatient voice as he proceeded to the main entrance of the house.

"Must be after eight," he was saying to Clancy. "I can't see how we could have done it, but we've probably missed him on the road, and he'll be flirting with Mother by this time. Never mind, she'll keep him till we get back, and it really isn't so very late."

They were walking along the slightly trodden snow on the inner edge of the terrace nearest the house. At its outer margin, save for a break in the middle, opposite the entrance, a row of closely planted, pointed cedars cast their pale blue shadows out upon the faintly gleaming snow. Other shadows than

these there were none, for the terrace was quite open to the sky.

"We ought to have a good day to-morrow," Harrison went on, hopefully, pressing the button of the front-door bell, which answered with a vibrant buzzing ring, far at the other end of the silent house. "The wind's in the southwest, and it's warming up. The snow'll be gone by noon." He pressed the bell again, impatiently, and turned slightly on the doorstep, looking up at the sky. "Clouds all breaking away," he added as the moon suddenly rode clear in all its shining beauty. "We'll have—— Good heavens! What is it, Clancy?"

Peter Clancy had caught his arm in a vise-like grip and swung him about with his back to the door. He was pointing straight out across the terrace, where some steps led down to a broad, smooth, snow-covered lawn.

"My God! Look at that!"

At the wild note of alarm in Clancy's voice Kent leaped from the car, and came running toward them on the inner side of the terrace.

"What is it? What has happened?" he shouted, breathlessly. "Is Hood——"

At the same instant there was the sound of hurrying feet inside the house. Lights flashed up in lanterns all along the terrace; the door swung open, and a tall man stood on the threshold.

"That you, Harrison?"

"Oh Louis, Louis! Thank God you're—— Look! Look there!"

"My—My God!" groaned Louis Hood in an agonized murmur. "He must have done it, after all!' And he dashed madly straight across the terrace.

"Stop! Hood! Stop! for God's sake! Keep clear! Keep around to the right!" shouted Clancy, his voice thrilling with intense excitement as he darted after Hood. "You, too, Harry: keep around this way!" he called over his shoulder.

Obedient to the tone of command, Carlisle and Kent swerved a little to the right, as they followed, breathlessly.

The moon and the lights along the terrace made it as light as day. In the centre, opposite the house door, where the wall of cedars which sheltered the terrace edge was broken, a few broad shallow steps led down to the smooth, sloping lawn, over whose blank whiteness the moon shed its clear, still radiance.

Lying almost in the centre of the steps, half upon them, and half upon the smooth snow-carpet of the lawn, lay a sprawling, horrible, inert mass—a something which had once been human, sentient, alive in every pulse of pounding heart and throbbing brain, but which now lay still and awful, with head strangely twisted on one shoulder, with stark white face turned upward, a great blot of crimson beside it, staining the shining snow.

"He is quite dead," groaned Hood, who was al-

ready on his knees beside the body when Clancy swiftly reached his side.

Peter leaned over quickly and touched Hood's shoulder.

"Don't," he whispered in Hood's ear, and, as the other turned a startled, stricken face toward him, Peter said aloud, a little sharply, "Don't disturb the body, Mr. Hood! I've had a good deal of experience. You'd better let me——" He caught Louis Hood lightly by the arm, and drew him back, swiftly taking his place beside the body.

After a moment's examination, he turned toward the white, awed faces which were bending above him, and shook his head.

"Stone dead," he said, gravely: "Been dead nearly an hour, I should think. Who is it?" he added, looking from one to the other, his glance coming to rest on the face of Louis Hood.

The other two men shook their heads in startled, awed bewilderment and also turned to Hood for an answer.

"He called himself Walter Brown," Hood said, slowly, after a pause. "I knew him only slightly. I—— Oh, poor boy, poor boy! He must have been more desperate than——"

Clancy broke in sharply: "You think he killed himself?" he asked, looking Hood full in the eyes.

"Why, of course," Hood muttered, confusedly. "There was no one else here, and——"

Again Clancy shook his head, and the gravity of his face deepened. He turned and bent above the prostrate figure, motioning to the others to look. "How could he have killed himself?" he asked. "You see?" He pointed with a hand which, in spite of the many terrible scenes he had witnessed, shook a little. "That wound in the neck might have been self-inflicted—but, see this! Look at the strange position of the head. Nothing in a fall of his own height could account for it. Notice the way it lies, bent clear over on the right shoulder. It could only lie like that for one reason. The man's neck is broken!" He said this with a quiet finality.

"That means——" whispered Carlisle, speaking almost for the first time, and it was odd to see how strangely horror and awe strove for mastery in his humorous, careless face.

"It means," said Clancy, straightening and speaking with an air of authority, "it means—murder!"

There was an instant's gasping, horrified silence. Louis Hood put up his hand, covering his eyes for a second. Carlisle stared at Clancy, his expression suddenly gone perfectly blank. Kent glanced sidewise at Hood with a strange look—was it suspicion?—in his keen, dark eyes, but he said never a word.

No one thought of doubting Clancy's statement. The facts, when noted, spoke for themselves. It was impossible for a man to break his own neck, and the strange position of the head, at a complete right

angle from the body, left no doubt that such, unlikely as it might seem, was the case. Peter went on without a pause:

"You must get the police and the doctor at once. Hurry up! No time should be lost; though there's no hope for him, poor chap!" He looked back at the awful, still figure on the steps. "It's of you I am thinking." He turned to Hood, who had come out without coat or hat, and was shaking violently with cold and excitement. "It's a damned unpleasant thing to have happen on your own doorstep. But pull yourself together, man, and get the police here as fast as you can. That's your job. You go with him, Harry, and you, too, Mr. Kent. Go in where it's warm. I'll wait here."

As the door closed behind the three men, Clancy turned on the doorstep and shook his head sadly.

"Oh, Pete, Pete, old top," he said to himself, "you're out of luck again. There'll be no fishing trip, of course. But you needn't take this case. You need a rest. Let someone else worry." His tone was almost pleading. "Let someone else——"

He walked a few paces along the inner edge of the terrace toward the car from which they had alighted in such high spirits only a few moments before. A few paces—and stopped, regarding with frowning eyes the broad surface of the terrace pavement covered evenly with smooth white snow.

"And yet, it's a pretty case, Pete. You won't see

another like it in many a long day. A strange, baffling case."

He raised his hand to his mouth and caught his thumb between his teeth, considering, with bent head.

"Exactly what do *you* mean?" he muttered, softly, looking steadily down at his feet. "One line of footprints leading to the body—and none returning from it. One line—and only one. I can swear it. When the lights flashed up, it was as bright as day, and they were perfectly clear and distinct. There was no mark in the snow anywhere near the body except that one single line of footprints—and no sign of a struggle. And yet it was murder. It could be nothing else. It was murder, as I am a living soul!"

CHAPTER III

Peter Clancy Puzzles Inspector Winkle

"NO POSSIBLE doubt about it!"

Dr. Bernard Moore, a dark, clever-looking man of forty-five or fifty, who had been hastily summoned and had arrived almost simultaneously with the two blue-coated policemen from the village, was speaking in a low, decided voice to the police inspector, who had but that moment reached the scene of the tragedy, having made all possible speed from Morrisville, the county town, lying about five miles to the west of Fern Hills.

"I have no doubt you are right, Doctor. It looks as if the poor chap had been dead some time, and as if his neck was broken," said the inspector, gravely, bending low over the body, which still lay in its strange position on the terrace steps. "Seems kind of unnecessary, too, with that cut in his throat." His sharp little eyes, in their folds of leathery flesh, glanced rapidly over the prostrate figure, and his bald eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

He turned quickly to the small group of gentlemen who stood drawn close together, a few paces behind

him, and asked abruptly: "Which is Mr. Hood, if you please?"

Louis Hood stepped forward, and the inspector eyed him earnestly. What the inspector saw was a tall, slender, well-knit man, in his early prime, his lithe, sinewy figure and broad, square shoulders assorting well with the rough shooting coat, heavy cord riding breeches, and high leather shoe-packs which he wore, since he was ready dressed for the fishing trip which had been so tragically interrupted. His face was rather long, the bones well articulated, the features clearly cut, but somewhat irregular. His mouth was shaded by a small, dark moustache. His thick, straight hair, dark also, save for a slight trace of gray at the temples, was cut short, showing a crisp angle above the well-set ears. Under his arm he carried an old, soft felt hat, around the crown of which was twisted a leader with two or three brightly coloured trout-flies. He returned the inspector's gaze steadily, though behind his deeply shadowed eyes there lurked an expression which the elderly police officer found it difficult to fathom.

There had been but an instant's pause. The inspector spoke again.

"Tell me all you know of this," he said, crisply, indicating, with a slight gesture of his left hand, the tragic figure at his feet. "Who he was; how he came to be here; how the body was found—and all the rest."

"He called himself—Walter Brown," Hood answered, slowly.

"Called himself?" repeated the inspector with a sharp, sidelong upward glance. "Then he isn't a friend of yours?"

"I knew him years ago," said Hood, hesitatingly. "He——" and stopped.

The inspector waited a moment for him to go on, but as he remained silent, the inspector only said: "Hm-m," and looked down again at the body, his puzzled frown deepening.

"Anybody else here know him?" he asked at length, raising his head suddenly and glancing from one to the other.

A shake of the head was the only reply. He turned back to Louis Hood. "I'll have to ask you for more particulars a little later, Mr. Hood," he said. "Now, who found the body? When and how was it discovered?"

Hood answered quickly and readily: "My friend Mr. Carlisle," indicating with a motion of his hand, "and Mr. Kent and Mr. Clancy found the poor fellow. I was in the house."

"Just so," said the inspector, acknowledging the introductions with a curt nod. "My name's Winkle. And now we know each other." He took in the three men with a swift, appraising glance which came to rest on Peter. "It was you," he said, with a queer little stabbing motion of his blunt forefinger, "it

was you that met me at the steps over there, and told me to come along close to the house. Why was that?" and he threw up his head, raised his bald eyebrows, and favoured Clancy with a piercing look.

"I thought," said Peter, diffidently, "if there was any question raised as to whether it was murder or suicide, that you ought to see for yourself what was implied by the footprints in the snow near the body. We've kept as clear as we could."

"Very well thought of. Very well thought of," said the inspector, with another sharp glance. "Now——"

"If you'll come a little this way," said Peter, "I'll show you what was here when we came," and he led the inspector back across the terrace to the house door, keeping in the track which had been made by the several passing feet, and which curved toward the west, as has already been stated, and then followed eastward, straight along the house front.

After they had passed the door, he proceeded a half-dozen paces in the direction of the driveway. Then he stopped and pointed down at his feet. The other men, who had followed Clancy and the inspector, stopped also, and leaning forward, followed Clancy's statements with breathless interest.

"When we reached here," said Clancy, impressively, "except for a slightly trodden path along the back of the terrace, here where we stand, this one

line of footprints, running, as you see, in a diagonal line straight to the body, was absolutely the only mark in the snow."

"What!" exclaimed the inspector, straightening suddenly, and regarding Peter with surprise not unmixed with incredulity. "That's impossible! There must have been——"

"Why, sir," broke in Doctor Moore, leaning past the others to get a better view of Peter, "this man, Brown, or whatever his name is, was killed. Murdered. I'll stake my professional reputation on it! He might have made the wound in his throat himself, I grant you, and if so the weapon will be close at hand; for, though the cut was not very deep, it was deep enough to open the jugular vein, and he must have died from it very soon, if that were the cause of death. But it wasn't. He died instantly—and from a broken neck. Now don't tell me a man could break his own neck in a case like this. It isn't possible. There must have been a terrible struggle with someone who knew all the tricks of wrestling, and——"

"You can see for yourself," interrupted Peter, quietly, "that there are no marks of a struggle near the body. There are only our own footprints, and I've made it a point to keep all those on the far side, you will remember. None of them were there when Mr. Hood switched on the lights as he came out of the house. That was just at the instant that

we discovered the body. The body lay just as it had fallen, in a smooth sheet of unmarked, undisturbed snow. This line of footprints," he pointed again, "led to it, and there was nothing else. Absolutely nothing else. It was the first thing that caught my eye, and I had no doubt, at that time, that it was a case of suicide. It was merely a natural desire to preserve the proof that made me caution every one who approached the body to go wide of it, and keep off to the right."

"Well," said Inspector Winkle, drawing a deep breath, and still regarding Peter fixedly, "this certainly beats anything I ever heard!"

The doctor shook his head and muttered something about impossibilities never happening. The rest preserved a tense silence.

"You've noticed, of course, Inspector," said Peter, after a slight pause, "that whoever made this line of footprints was running."

"Uh-h-m-m, yes," replied Winkle, pushing up his cap to wipe his forehead, and bending down again. "I see what you mean. Marks of the two feet here and just the toes from there on. Hum, yes. And the steps are long. Running—— Yes, of course—— And he came from that direction"—he pointed toward the end of the terrace nearest the waiting automobile—"and ran straight from this point toward the middle steps. Apparently he didn't go to the house. Did you know any one was

here, Mr. Hood?" The inspector turned quickly as he said this, and glanced sharply at Louis Hood.

"Not—not then," answered Hood. "Walter—Brown was here earlier in the evening." More than one of the eager listeners noted the slight pause between the two names, and the faint air of constraint with which the reply was given.

"And came back?" asked the inspector.

"I didn't know he came back," answered Hood, a trifle more readily.

"Hum," said Winkle. "Then whose footprints are these?"

"I think I can answer that," said Peter. "Of course we can't be sure until after the coroner's been here, but I measured as well as I could, and I should say, without doubt, that they were made by the man who lies dead there."

The inspector regarded Peter curiously through half-closed eyes.

"We'll make sure of that after the coroner has been here," he said, slowly. "But if the man went upon his own feet to the place where he lies, unless he was killed somewhere else and the body carried there, I agree with Doctor Moore—there *must* have been other footprints."

"There weren't," asserted Clancy, firmly. "That I can swear to." Then seeing the continued doubt in the inspector's eyes, he turned to Harrison Car-

lisle. "Didn't you notice, Harry?" he asked, eagerly; "didn't it strike you?"

"Why—why, yes," said Carlisle, excitedly. "When you called to us to go wide, I got you right away. Sportsman's instinct—followed so many game tracks in the snow, I suppose. I saw why at once, and I'm sure there weren't any tracks but these and our own on that part of the terrace."

"Were you sharp enough to notice it, too, Mr. Hood?" asked Inspector Winkle, with a sidelong look.

Louis Hood shook his head.

"I was too much excited and concerned," he answered. "I thought only——"

"And you, Mr. Kent?" asked the inspector.

"I wasn't thinking about footprints at a time like that," said Kent, nervously. "This kind of thing is —well, rather awful, don't you know. I was considerably upset," and indeed he did look white and shaken. "The others were ahead of me, and I didn't think——"

The inspector bit his lip, and looked at the doctor. The doctor looked at the inspector and shook his head.

"Well," said Winkle, doubtfully, "it looks like a puzzling case. By your leave, gentlemen," and he passed them and went on to the house entrance. Here he paused and waited for the others, who were not slow in following.

He addressed himself again to Clancy.

"Here," he said, standing on the doorstep, with his back to the door, "you were sharp enough to bring us all around to the right there—but here's one track going straight from this door to the body. Whose is that?" and his glance was never keener than when he put the question.

"I think it must be mine," said Louis Hood at once. "I know I'd almost reached poor Walter before Mr. Clancy stopped me."

"Ah," said Inspector Winkle. "Ah, yes, I see. Now would you mind, just as matter of form, stepping into a couple of those marks to make sure? Just as a matter of form, you understand. Ah—thank you. Yes. They would appear to be yours. Yes, of course. You ran straight down. Naturally. Your own house. Such a startling occurrence. Naturally——"

There followed a moment of complete silence. Then the doctor cleared his throat and said: "I still maintain that that man's injuries couldn't have been self-inflicted. There must have been someone with him, and——"

"Well, if there was," Clancy interrupted, somewhat heatedly, "one of them must have had wings. At least I can swear he didn't set foot on the terrace any nearer than the spot where we now stand, and I'll be glad to take my oath on it at the inquest. I've made a pretty careful diagram, Inspector——"

"What! Already?" broke in Winkle.

"Yes. The measurements are accurate from here to where the line of footprints starts and from here to the body. I'd like now to make sure of the length of the stride, and all that. Didn't want to do it before you could see it for yourself, but the snow may go off before morning, it's so much warmer, and——"

"Look here," interrupted the inspector, as if struck by a sudden thought, "did I understand your name was Clancy? You seem to know a great deal about this business. It's been puzzling me all the evening. You aren't—a man as young as you—you can't be Peter Clancy, the detective!"

"That's my name and business," admitted Peter, quietly, smiling a little at the older man's excitement.

The inspector held out his hand.

"Well, I'm sure glad to meet you, Mr. Peter Clancy," he said, heartily. "I've heard enough about you. Knew your partner O'Malley years ago. Are we to have the benefit of your experience in this?" A slight tone of jealousy crept into the inspector's voice. Peter was quick to notice it.

"It's not my case at all, Inspector," he answered, cordially. "It's all up to you. I just thought I'd put you wise to a few things, and I suppose I'll have to stay for the inquest, since Mr. Carlisle and I found the body. But after that I'm through."

"I see," said the inspector, his good nature entirely restored. "Strange you happened to be here,

wasn't it? How is it that you're in this part of the country? And who'd have expected to see a New York detective in a rig like that?" He grinned as he looked at Peter's fishing clothes.

Peter explained in as few words as possible. The two policemen who were stationed not far away listened eagerly. Louis Hood stood a little apart with arms folded across his breast, one hand gripping his narrow chin, his head bent in deep thought. Robert Kent touched Carlisle's arm.

"Your friend Clancy is the famous Peter Clancy?" he questioned in a low voice, so as not to interrupt the conversation of the two professionals. "You didn't tell me. How very interesting—and opportune."

"Yes," answered Harrison, in the same low tone, "but I don't think Peter'll let himself get mixed up in this. The boy's worn out and needs a rest. Oh! It's a frightful thing altogether. I wonder——"

But what Harrison Carlisle wondered was never to be known, for at that moment the coroner drove up in a small car, and the group in the middle of the terrace broke up and straggled out to receive him, Inspector Winkle in the lead.

The coroner was a round apple-faced man with prematurely white hair and a benignant expression. He had been called away from a small evening party of old cronies and was in a hurry to return to them.

If the dead man had been one of the old county residents he would have been more concerned, for he prided himself on his knowledge of, and recognition by the old families of that section, but since the man was reported a stranger in those parts, he would have been glad if it had been possible to put off the whole affair till the morrow.

Since that could not be, he contented himself with a quick though careful survey of the body, listened intently to the inspector's explanations of how and when it had been found, and gave permission for its more thorough examination.

Doctor Moore and the inspector bent again above it. The doctor verified his conclusions in a few minutes, but the inspector took rather longer. He went through the dead man's pockets carefully, quickly and secretly transferring their contents to his own. Peter, try as he might, could not see what the articles were, for the inspector was between him and the body, and his bulk effectually concealed them from view.

When he had finished Winkle began with carefully groping fingers to search on each side of the body, holding a pocket flashlight close to the ground. His lack of skill nearly drove Clancy distracted, and after a moment's impatient observation, he offered to assist the inspector in his search.

Winkle gave his assent, but without particular enthusiasm, and together they investigated every

inch of snow for several yards around. When they had made a complete circuit both men regained their feet, and the inspector turned to the coroner with a shake of his head.

"No weapon," he said in a grave voice, "no knife—nothing. I guess that settles it in spite of——"

The coroner nodded. "I guess so, Jim. Looks bad, doesn't it? Death instantaneous, eh, Doctor? And weapon gone. Hm-m. Well, I think you won't need me any longer, Jim," he concluded after exchanging a few more words with the inspector. "I expect to be able to call the inquest by three o'clock to-morrow, but I'll 'phone you. I'll have to ask you gentlemen to attend as a formality," he added, turning to Hood and his friends. "Just a formality, just a formality. And you, too, Doctor Moore, if you please, unless you'd rather send in a written statement. Good-night, gentlemen. Good-night, Inspector," and the coroner hurried off to resume the game of whist which had been so rudely interrupted.

CHAPTER IV

Inspector Winkle Springs a Surprise

WHEN the low, rattling throb of the coroner's little car had died away in the distance, Inspector Winkle turned back to the little group which awaited him on the terrace.

The moon had ridden high in the still, pale sky. The air was soft and mild. The breeze sighed and whispered in the tops of the tall, dark pine trees which encircled the wide lawn, but the leaves of the rhododendron thicket were so still that they seemed a painted border of black upon the white sheet of faintly glimmering snow. The row of cedars along the terrace face stood like tall sentinels, guarding the secret which lay between them. They were hardly more silent than the little cluster of men who waited before the door of the old gray house.

The good doctor had with his own hand composed the limbs of the poor wrecked body, and with the help of the two policemen and Peter Clancy had lifted it so that it now lay stiff and straight upon the snow-covered bricks of the terrace.

Clancy stood beside it looking quietly down. The man had been tall, well above the average height,

he saw, and very thin, though his shoulders were broad and well proportioned. Dressed in a loose, short, heavy coat, trousers tucked into high boots, he had the look of a Westerner, perhaps, or at least of a man unused to city life. The face was deadly pale, with an even sickly pallor which consorted strangely with his rough out-of-door garb. The features were spirited and fine, the nose thin and aristocratic, but the mouth and chin indicated a passionate temperament coupled with a weak will. Though the face was comparatively young, the hair, cropped very short, was snowy white.

One of the policemen had picked up a soft felt hat, which had fallen far over to the right, and now tendered it to the inspector, who received it with a nod.

"You and Peabody stay out here, Allen," said Inspector Winkle. "They'll be here pretty soon to take him away. Let me know when they come. Now, Mr. Hood, with your permission, we'll go inside. I'd like to ask a few more questions of you and your friends, and I think we'd all be more comfortable—somewhere else. I won't need you any further, Doctor Moore, and I'm much obliged to you for coming so promptly," and Winkle held out his hand.

"I'd just as soon stay, Inspector, if you think I could be of service," said the doctor, hesitatingly. He was a man of considerable intelligence, and had

his full share of human curiosity, and the present case, in view of the statements of the New York detective, presented many points of exceptional interest. There were a lot of things about it he would be glad to know, but the inspector said: "No, no. There's no reason for keeping you any longer. You'll have a chance to prove your points at the inquest," and the doctor was forced, reluctantly, to withdraw.

When he had done so, the small party of men entered the wide door of the house, Louis Hood leading the way.

The big square hall presented an appearance of silence and desertion which struck coldly on the eye and ear. The large pictures hanging about the walls were covered with white cloths and made little break, save for their gray shadows, against the whiteness of the panels. The two large rooms which opened out, one on either hand, were likewise swathed and sheeted, and looked ghostly in the light which filtered dimly in from the terrace, through drawn blinds. At the back of the hall a wide staircase rose to a landing from which it turned and vanished in the upper shadows.

"You'll find it more comfortable out here," said Louis Hood, opening a small door at the left, under the landing. "This part of the house has been closed since my mother's death. There's a fire in the housekeeper's room, however."

The others followed in silence. They passed through a short passage guarded by double baize-covered doors, and reached a small, plain, cheery room, well warmed and lighted. There were signs of constant occupancy all about it. A sewing machine stood in one corner with a darning basket on its closed top. On the small table in the centre of the room were the remains of a hasty meal. It had been neatly laid out for one person, though an extra glass, a few crumbs, and a chair half drawn up on the opposite side of the table seemed to indicate that more than one person had partaken of it.

These, and other details of slight disorder, Peter Clancy noted as soon as he entered the room, but what impression, if any, they made upon the inspector, he could not determine, for the face of Inspector Winkle was perfectly noncommittal as he drew up a chair, and seated himself at one of the cleared sides of the table.

"Now, if you please, Mr. Hood, we'll get down to brass tacks," he said, drawing out a notebook. "In the first place, is there any one else in the house?"

Louis Hood was standing before him, leaning on a high mantel shelf. Carlisle had perched himself on the arm of an old horsehair sofa which stood against the wall and was listening eagerly. Peter had seated himself at the end of the room between the windows which opened toward the west. ("The same being

the reason why we saw no light," he said to himself.) Only Robert Kent moved about restlessly, as if wishing that the formalities might soon be over so that they could all return to the comforts and peace of ordinary existence.

"No, there is no one in the house but ourselves," said Hood, replying to the inspector's question. "The caretakers, a man and his wife, 'phoned in to me in New York this morning asking permission to go into town for the night. I was only stopping to change my clothes and to get my fishing tackle which was here——"

"And your supper——" suggested Inspector Winkle.

"And my supper, as you say," Hood responded.

Harrison Carlisle looked a little surprised. Kent leaned over his shoulder and whispered: "If he was in Fern Hills at dinner time, why didn't he come over to your house, as he promised?"

"I don't know," Harrison answered, hastily. "He 'phoned from town that he couldn't get there in time, and I supposed—— But listen."

The inspector had asked another question and Hood was replying.

"I reached here at about six. The caretakers had already gone, but it didn't matter, as I always have the key to the front door."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"I think you said that this man, Walter Brown, was here earlier in the evening. At what time was that?"

"He came very soon after I did."

All of Hood's answers were given in a low, firm voice, but there was an air of unrest about him, an indefinable uncertainty which did not escape the sharp eyes of Peter Clancy.

"Since you aren't living here, I naturally suppose he came by appointment," said Inspector Winkle, watching Hood's face narrowly.

"You are quite right," Hood responded, as quietly as before.

"What was his business with you, Mr. Hood? Forgive me if I seem inquisitive, but, as a lawyer, you must understand that it's necessary for me to find out all I can about the man."

"I quite understand your position, Inspector," said Hood, with every appearance of grave sincerity, "and I am glad to help you all I can. The man was poor and needy and I wanted to see him and find out how I could best assist him."

"Why, then, didn't you have him come to your office in town?"

"He was already in Fern Hills. He didn't know that the house was closed, and that I was living in town. He 'phoned my office from the village, and as I was coming out in any case, I told him to wait here."

"But he evidently didn't wait here, since he came after you did," objected the inspector.

"I can't quite see that it matters," said Hood with a touch of impatience. "I suppose he must have waited somewhere in the village. At any rate, he was here soon after six. We discussed his affairs, I helped him as much as I could, and——"

Inspector Winkle held up his hand.

"Just a minute," he said, and feeling in the pocket in which he had placed the articles taken from the pockets of the dead man, he drew out a small, folded oblong of greenish paper, and laid it on the table. He opened it deliberately, adjusted his glasses, nodded slightly as if confirming a previous observation, and remarked in a cordial tone, "I should say you were a very good man to appeal to in case of need, Mr. Hood. Very generous, very generous, indeed, if you'll allow me to say so. It isn't everyone who'd give even a hundred dollars to a man he knew only slightly, or hadn't seen for a long time." Though he spoke pleasantly there was a faint touch of sarcasm in his tone which nettled Harrison Carlisle and roused him to the defence of his friend.

"A hundred dollars isn't such a hell of a lot of money," he asserted, hotly, for his heart was as warm and generous as his bank account was long. "Anybody'd do that much to help a poor devil out of a mess."

"Very true, very true, perhaps, Mr. Carlisle." Winkle glanced around, frowning at the interruption. "But as it happens, this check is for a thousand."

Harrison Carlisle started a little and looked quickly across at Louis Hood. Kent stopped in his aimless ramble about the room and, after a swift sidelong glance at Hood, remained immovable, his gaze resting on the floor. With brows drawn together, he seemed lost in puzzled contemplation. Only Peter Clancy appeared unaffected by the startling announcement. He sat, as he had sat all along, regarding all the actors in the scene with impartial, silent interest.

Winkle continued without pause. He spoke slowly, consideringly: "Hm-m. Yes. A thousand dollars is quite a sum of money to give, off hand. It almost seems, to an impartial observer, as if there must have been some claim—of relationship, perhaps—a secret understanding—or something. But that's impossible, of course. You said, I think, Mr. Hood, that Walter Brown had no special claim on you, that you hardly knew him." He leaned back in his chair and twirled his pencil slowly round and round between his fingers, looking at Hood all the time.

There was a short silence in which the ticking of the clock on the mantel sounded loud and harsh. Then Hood stirred a little and said: "It wouldn't, perhaps, be exact to say that I knew him only

slightly, though I've seen nothing of him for—for a long time. I knew him well when we were boys. I was very glad to be of assistance to him."

"After all, a thousand dollars isn't such an awful lot of money to help out an old friend," grunted Harrison Carlisle, though his tone was less sure and open than it had been.

Winkle frowned again at the repeated interruption, but when he spoke to Hood there was no trace of irritation in his voice.

"I wish you'd tell me, in your own way, just all you know of this man Brown," he said. "I rather got the idea from something you let drop that possibly that wasn't his right name. 'Called himself Walter Brown,' you said, rather implying——"

"That was just an expression," interrupted Hood. "His name was Brown, Walter Brown. You'll see that the check was made out to his order."

Clancy, glancing up at this, caught a speculative look in Harrison Carlisle's eye. Kent also seemed struck by the thought which was in the mind of each. He raised his eyes from their long contemplation of the floor, gazing at Hood with peculiar interest. Twice, in their hearing, Hood had said that the man "called himself Walter Brown." Why should he have used those ambiguous words at all if Walter Brown was really the man's name?

The inspector, however, appeared quite satisfied. Hood had continued speaking, still with that vague

almost imperceptible note of hesitation in his voice. "I don't think there is much more that I can tell you about him. He went West several years ago and only returned to-day. In fact, he stopped off at Newark from the Chicago train and came back here."

"Has he any relations living?" asked the inspector as Hood paused.

"I think very few—and I know he felt they were dead to him," replied Hood, gravely.

"Did any one besides yourself know that he was here?"

"I should say emphatically not," said Hood with conviction.

"Not the caretakers?"

"I had it on his own statement that he didn't know there was any one in the house. He came in through the front drive, found the house closed and apparently deserted, and didn't even ring the bell."

"But the caretakers were here then?"

"Yes, for I 'phoned them just before I called you, Harry, to ask them to leave out something for me to eat since I realized I would be late if I tried to dine with you. They were coming to town on the 5:17 train and must have left soon after."

"Then they might have seen Brown, perhaps, without his seeing them."

"I should think it very unlikely. As you see,

this wing is quite cut off from the main house and they would have had no particular business there at that time of day. The kitchen has its own drive which comes out quite at the other end of the place in the direction of Melbrook. They usually take the train there, so they wouldn't have gone through the main drive when they left, and I don't believe——"

"Probably of no importance, anyway," said Winkle, cutting him short. "Now just what time did Brown leave the house, do you know?"

"It was nearly seven, I think. In fact, I'm pretty sure, for I looked at my watch a little later, and it was only a few minutes after seven then."

Carlisle stirred uneasily in his chair. What had Louis been doing all that time? Nearly, if not quite, an hour. Was old Red-top thinking of that, too? And Kent? He glanced from one to the other, but though they were both listening intently, their faces betrayed nothing.

"Where was Brown when you saw him last?" the inspector was asking. "You went to the door with him, of course?"

"Why, no. As it happened, I didn't," answered Hood, considering thoughtfully. "I went as far as the main hall and put on the light for him. The switch is just inside the door of the little passage we came through just now. We parted there and he went on to the front door. I heard him open it

and then I switched off the light and hurried back here and up the back stairway to the room in which I keep my tackle. I was going on a fishing trip with Mr. Carlisle and didn't want to keep them waiting, and I had quite a good deal to do. I was only just ready when they came—and found——"

He raised his hand to his forehead and pushed his fingers upward through his thick dark hair, gripping his temples between his thumb and little finger, as if his head ached heavily.

"Come over here and sit down, Louis," said Harrison Carlisle, whose observant glance had noted the weariness of the gesture.

He rose from the arm of the sofa, crossed the room, and with brusque tenderness drew Louis Hood over to the couch and seated himself beside him.

Just then a faint though heavy footfall sounded through the house and someone called the inspector's name. He rose immediately and left the room.

"What's the old fellow keeping us all this time for?" asked Kent, irritably, as soon as the door was closed. "We've told him all we know. Mr. Clancy may have a professional interest in all this, but I can't see where you and I come in, Harry. Don't you think we can be getting away pretty soon? Your mother will be anxious, even though you did telephone her. I think we——"

"We're going to wait and take Louis home with us, Rob," said Carlisle, decidedly. "Mother'd

kill me if I left him here all alone to-night. You will come, won't you, Louis?"

"Why, I don't know, Harry." Hood seemed moved by the kindness of his friend's tone. He dropped his head upon his hands with a gesture of weariness and anxiety which spoke volumes. The bracing effect of the inspector's presence having been removed the whole man relaxed for the time being. He seemed to shrink together inside his clothes, and his voice was low and troubled as he continued: "I don't know what this horrible business will lead to and there's no use in putting off my worries on any of you. There's no reason why I shouldn't stay here to-night. Eliza always keeps a room ready for me in case I want to spend the night, and——"

Harrison thought that there was a note of reluctance in his friend's voice, a natural disinclination to remain in the lonely, empty house which had been the scene of such a hideous tragedy, and he spoke with cordial, firm insistence: "You're coming with us, old top," he said. "I won't take 'no' for an answer. Neither would Mother, if she were here. We'll wait for you if it takes all night, won't we, Peter?"

"You bet we will," answered Clancy, heartily. "You couldn't drive me away with a gun, anyhow. I want to see just what sort of local talent you've got out here, and what our friend Winkle is going

to make of the case. He's no fool, Winkle isn't, and yet he doesn't seem to be particularly impressed with the facts that seem most important to my mind."

"You mean——?" queried Hood, flashing a swift upward glance at Clancy.

"I mean," Peter began, and stopped as the sound of footsteps in the passage came faintly to his sharp ears. "Here he is," he said, holding up his hand. "I'll tell you later."

The inspector, as he came through the softly closing door, glanced quickly from one face to the other as if wondering what the friends had been talking about in his absence. He didn't mention the cause of the summons and neither did any of the four men question him, but all experienced a feeling of relief in the knowledge that the fair, broad terrace was now untenanted, and that the moon with its clear light shone on nothing more awful than the stained and trampled snow.

As if the inspector's entrance had been a powerful tonic, Louis Hood raised his head alertly and squared his shoulders, bracing himself for the questions which remained to be answered.

Inspector Winkle seated himself in his old place beside the table, drawing his notebook out of the pocket into which he had hastily thrust it when he left the room. He referred to some notes he had made in it.

"So the last you saw of this Walter Brown was at your own front door, Mr. Hood," he continued, as if the long series of questions and answers had been quite uninterrupted. "Am I right?" He shifted his position slightly, turning sidewise from the table so as to face Hood squarely.

"That was the last I saw him alive," replied Louis Hood, firmly.

"And you were then at the back of the main hall?"

"Yes."

"You heard nothing after that? No sound of a struggle? No cries?"

"Nothing," Hood replied in the same tone as before. "If there was anything to hear I might very well not have been aware of it for, as you see, the house is very long and I went directly up to the storeroom which is on the third floor at the extreme north end. But I imagine there was nothing. In spite of Doctor Moore's opinion I am still confident that Walter died by his own hand."

The inspector shook his head slowly.

"I'm afraid that theory won't hold water, Mr. Hood, though I can understand that for many reasons you would prefer to believe it."

"Whether I would prefer it or not," interjected Hood, somewhat sharply, "is beside the question. The man had no enemies in this part of the country; certainly no one knew he was here, of that I am positive. There could have been no motive for

so hideous a crime. He had been terribly unfortunate. He was fearfully despondent——"

"And so you conclude that he killed himself?" interrupted Inspector Winkle, coolly. "Killed himself—with a check for one thousand dollars in his pocket. It isn't often done according to my experience. What do you think, Mr. Clancy?"

"I'm with Mr. Hood." Peter, thus appealed to, spoke for the first time, with studied deliberation. "Brown reached the spot where we found him on his own feet. His footmarks in the snow prove that beyond question. No one else had been anywhere near him. Therefore he must have made away with himself."

He spoke with such quiet conviction that both Carlisle and Kent turned toward him with a start. Hood also looked at him with surprised and hopeful eyes. All three had heard Clancy state distinctly, upon his first examination of the body, that it was unquestionably a case of murder. Why, then, this sudden change of front? The answer to the obvious query lay hidden behind the young detective's frank, blue, but inscrutable eyes.

"But death was instantaneous," objected Inspector Winkle. "His neck was broken. And, as for the wound in his throat—we found no knife, no sharp-edged weapon of any sort—you know that yourself, Mr. Clancy, since you helped me look for it."

"There's a good deal of snow," Peter suggested,

"and a small object like a safety razor blade, for instance, might easily have escaped us. That would have been a sufficient weapon for the purpose. The wound was sharply cut and not very deep."

"That's true," said Winkle, slowly. "That much is certainly true, but"— he paused as if to give his next words more weight— "how do you account, Mr. Clancy, for the broken neck? Eh? And why do you think a man would kill himself with a razor blade (which would be awkward to carry unless it was in a case, and apparently it couldn't have been, since none was found) when he not only had a check for one thousand dollars in his pocket"—again he paused— "but this, as well."

The inspector's voice was so full of concealed triumph that the four other occupants of the room watched with strained expectancy while he deliberately put his hand in the capacious side pocket of his coat. He glanced from one tense face to the other, a slightly superior smile just bending up the corners of his wide mouth, as his eyes met those of Peter Clancy inquiringly fixed upon him.

Slowly he drew forth his concealed right hand and laid upon the table an able-looking Colt's revolver.

CHAPTER V

"When We Find That Bullet——"

I FOUND that on the body," the inspector explained, breaking the sudden silence which ensued upon the unexpected production of the unlooked-for weapon. "Now tell me if you can, Mr. Clancy," he wagged a stubby forefinger, "why, in Heaven's name, a man bent on suicide would cut his throat with a weapon which doesn't exist, and break his own neck, into the bargain—and all the while have a revolver handy in his pocket."

Peter had risen and was bending over the inspector's shoulder. Kent also had stepped forward and kneeling with one knee on the chair at the end of the table, leaned far over, looking at the pistol with fascinated eyes. Harrison Carlisle thought Louis said something under his breath, but he didn't catch the words.

"Have you examined the gun?" asked Clancy, quietly, touching it with his forefinger. "It may not have been loaded, you see, and that may account——"

Winkle grunted, inarticulately, and his eyebrows shot up. The idea evidently had not occurred

to him. With the caution born of long and intimate experience of small arms he immediately proceeded to break the revolver. As he did so the ejector performed its allotted function, the plunger shot up and dropped again, four cartridges lifted themselves smoothly from the shining cylinder, but from the fifth chamber, like a live thing, an empty shell jumped out and fell with a sharp metallic ring upon the table.

The inspector, with a muttered oath of surprise, reached out a swift hand and clutched the telltale shell as it rolled away from him. Clancy's brows contracted in a sudden frown and he sent a quick sidelong glance in the direction of the sofa, but said nothing.

"By all that's holy!" exclaimed the inspector, glancing from the empty shell to the pistol and back again. "One shot's been fired! Do you get that? One shot's been fired," he repeated, turning the revolver to look into the muzzle—"and recently, too! At least it's not been cleaned since! Now what do you make of that, Mr. Peter Clancy?"

"That one shot's been fired, and the gun hasn't been cleaned since," agreed Peter, quietly. "Well, what of it? What do *you* make of it, Mr. Inspector?"

"Why, that the man didn't commit suicide!" cried Winkle in a raised, excited voice. "He certainly didn't shoot himself. Then whom did he shoot, or shoot at? Why, the man who threatened

his life and finally got him! No question about it! When we find that bullet——"

He stopped suddenly, for Kent, now ashy pale, had reached across the table and touched his arm with a hand that shook with excitement.

"Hood can explain, no doubt," he said in a voice trembling with emotion, "and I think he should explain at once—for his own sake." He swallowed as if his mouth had suddenly become dry. "If you look over there—over there in the corner by the window—I think—I'm almost certain—that you'll find the missing bullet."

With another oath the inspector kicked back his chair and lumbered swiftly over to the corner indicated. Swift as he was, Clancy was before him. There was a small, built-in closet in that corner, an old-fashioned closet with little square glazed panels in the upper doors. In one of these panes was a small, round hole, from which radiated a number of fine cracks. Clancy's quick eyes had already discovered the shattered pane, and his hand had pulled the door open when Winkle reached his side. Upon a shelf, on a level with the eye, was an old copper teakettle, standing well back against the wall. Clancy reached up, drew it forth, and handed it to Winkle without a word. The kettle was drilled through from side to side.

Winkle glanced quickly at it, handed it unceremoniously to Peter, seized a chair, mounted

upon it, and thrust his hand into the cupboard, feeling the surface of the rear wall. In an instant he withdrew his hand, took a large knife from his trousers pocket, opened it, and began to dig in the plaster at the back of the closet. After a moment something fell to the shelf and rolled along it with a sharp rattle which sounded loud in the breathless silence. "When we find that bullet," the inspector had said—"When we find that bullet," he thought again as he stepped down from the chair and turned toward Louis Hood with the bullet in his hand.

Hood had risen from his seat. A dull flush stained his pale cheek. His eyes were unnaturally bright and keen. He answered Inspector Winkle's inquiring look as if the old officer had spoken.

"I meant to tell you about it, in any case," he said, hurriedly. "It was one of my reasons for deducing suicide. Walter was desperate when he came to me. I argued with him . . . tried to show him that—that there was still hope for him. . . . A new life". . . The phrases were quick, disjointed, charged with deep and apparently sincere emotion. "I tried to show him where he had fallen short . . . had failed. God knows I didn't mean to be hard on the boy. But he was more hopeless—more desperate than I realized. While I was speaking—without a word of warning he drew his pistol and levelled it—not at me! Oh, no! We had not quarrelled.

At himself. . . . I struck quickly—almost automatically, I think, for it seemed as if the flash on the revolver barrel and the flash of the shot were simultaneous, and yet I had been in time. The bullet went over his shoulder and buried itself in the wall. I did not look to see where it had gone. I caught the poor boy in my arms and made him sit down over there. . . . I talked to him for a long time, got him quieted down and made him listen to reason. I had means—I was willing to share with him—I, at last, induced him to accept something—the check you found. . . . I made him eat . . . I thought I had entirely succeeded in quieting him—in assuring him as to his future, when he left me. . . . And then——"

Hood dropped beside the table, and as though his emotions completely unmanned him, buried his face in his hands.

"Very affecting—very affecting, indeed," remarked Inspector Winkle, coolly, after a short silence. "A very complete explanation, as far as it goes, and I have no doubt true. No, no doubt whatever." He favoured Clancy with a knowing look as who should say: "You don't catch an old bird with chaff." But he did not catch Peter's eye, for that young man was looking in quite another direction. Slightly disappointed in his effort to take the renowned Clancy into his confidence and to show his non-gullibility, the inspector continued: "Un-

fortunately it still leaves a few things to be explained. Just a few. Here are two men, alone in a lonely house—the caretakers gone. . . . By the way, Mr. Hood, do you know just where they have gone?" His little gray eyes were like gimlets as he asked the question.

"Yes." Hood roused himself to reply. "John and Eliza have, I believe, a daughter playing at some theatre in New York. Some minor part in the 'Wishing Stile', I understand. She sent them tickets for to-night and they were very anxious to go. It was a great treat for them, naturally, and I was quite willing that they should go."

"They were to spend the night in New York?"

"Yes, with their daughter, I believe."

"Hm—yes," said the inspector. "Now, had these people been in your service long, Mr. Hood?"

"Why, about five or six years," answered Hood. "Eliza was cook and John was butler during the last years of my mother's life, and they served her so well that I kept them on to take care of the place."

"I see, yes. Five or six years—what you'd call old faithful family servants as things go in these days," said Inspector Winkle with a slight grin. "Too bad they happened to be away just to-night. Might have made a lot of difference if anybody'd been here."

"Just what do you mean by that, Inspector?"

Carlisle asked, angrily. He was shrewd enough to view the inspector's questions and remarks with considerable annoyance, and an anxious regard for his friend, Louis Hood, made him more than a little resentful of their tone.

"Oh," said Winkle, carelessly, "I only mean that if the house had been full of people a great many things mightn't have happened, or if they had to happen, more than one person would have seen what did happen," he concluded, a trifle lamely.

"I would like to call your attention once more, Inspector," Peter Clancy spoke with quiet insistence, "to the fact that it's difficult to imagine how even one person could have seen the most serious part of the events of this evening. I mean the actual means by which Walter Brown met his death. You don't seem to attach as much importance, as I must confess I do, to the evidence of the footprints on the terrace. You must admit that that line of footprints coming from the east and terminating at the spot where he was found, were his own footprints."

"Yes, I do admit that," said the inspector, somewhat grudgingly. "The boots he wore exactly fitted them, and there were hobs in the heels both of the tracks and of the boots. They were his, all right, I'm with you that far."

"Then how in thunder do you explain there being absolutely no other marks in the snow unless

you also admit that it was a case of suicide?" asked Peter, and waited for the answer of the slower mind with obvious impatience.

"I don't explain it," said the inspector at last, deliberately. "I can't explain it—yet. But I'm going to find out. I'm going to find out, gentlemen, if it takes a leg. If the marks in the snow were as you say, Mr. Clancy, and of course I don't doubt they were—a man of your trained observation and all. But even so—just to go back, to Brown's footprints—he was running. You called my attention to that yourself, and I had already noticed it. Well, now, can you imagine—can you picture to yourself—a man suddenly making up his mind to kill himself, and running, actually running to a certain spot to do it? It don't seem natural to me." He wagged his large gray head. "No, it don't seem natural—any way you look at it."

For a long time he remained silent. Then he roused himself from his fit of abstraction and spoke.

"I won't keep you gentlemen any longer to-night," he said. "You'll all be wanted at the coroner's inquest to-morrow. I'll let you know the time in the morning, though I think it's safe to say now that it won't be before two. Where can I reach you, by the way?"

"We're all going over to my house for the night," said Carlisle, relieved that the present ordeal was over. "The telephone number is Fern Hills 33."

"Mr. Hood going over with you?" asked Winkle; and, upon receiving a reply in the affirmative, he added: "That's right. That's right. More comfortable than here in the circumstances. No doubt. No doubt. Think I'll stay a little longer, if you've no objection, Mr. Hood. Just like to have a chance to think things over quietly—and it's quiet here. Listen. Not a sound. Not a sound, but the wind in the trees. Might seem mournful to a fanciful man. But I'm not fanciful. Lord bless you. I deal in facts—cold, hard facts—and the colder and harder the better, eh, Mr. Clancy?"

Clancy nodded his red head in complete and hearty acquiescence. He turned back, however, on the threshold of the room, the other men having preceded him down the short passage toward the front of the house, and added for the inspector's ear alone: "But all the facts, Mr. Inspector. Be sure you take all the facts, be they cold as snow or hot as hate, into account. There's more in this case than meets the casual eye—you can take it from me! I wish you luck, Mr. Inspector, but it may be a long, long time before any one writes, 'Q. E. D.' at the end of this problem."

"'Q. E. D.'?" queried the inspector, puzzled, "'Q. E. D.'? What do you mean by that, Mr. Clancy? I don't seem to see——"

"Why don't you know what we used to write at the end of our geometry problems in school,

when we were lucky enough to get 'em right?" Clancy grinned a little, as a light broke over the inspector's ruddy face, for he, too, had been a high-school boy, "You know—'Q.E.D.' 'Which was to be proved.' When you've proved the solution of this problem and can write that at the end, I'll take off my hat to you, Inspector, that I will. Good-night." And shaking the old policeman's hand, Peter Clancy followed his friends through the shrouded house of mystery.

CHAPTER VI

What Peter Heard

IT WAS after eleven o'clock when Harrison Carlisle's car drew up before his own house, but old Mrs. Carlisle was still up and watching for them. She had already opened the front door before they had succeeded in disentangling and lifting out the various bags and rods with which they had equipped themselves for the fishing expedition which was now no longer to be thought of—at least for the present.

"Too bad. I'm so sorry," said the old lady, feelingly, as the men came up the steps and deposited the traps in the front hall. To Louis Hood she gave her hand with an effect of sincere and quiet sympathy which was as quietly but most gratefully received. She had been his mother's friend for more years than she cared to count, and the trouble which had fallen on his house affected her almost as if it had been her own. She asked few questions, though the information which was voluntarily imparted was received by her with all the vital interest of a young and ardent spirit. She was a woman of few words,

but the remarks she did make were keen and to the point.

"Walter Brown, Walter Brown?" She repeated the name when it was told her with grave consideration. "I never knew him, did I, Louis? I don't seem to remember——"

"No, Mrs. Carlisle, you never knew him. We were friends long before my family came to Fern Hills to live and he went West many years ago. I don't know that you ever heard me even speak of him."

Was there still a note of restraint in Hood's voice as he answered this old, old friend? Peter could not be sure—and yet——

"Well, there's no use going over all this dreadful occurrence any more to-night, is there?" said Mrs. Carlisle, considerately. "You all must be dreadfully tired—completely worn out, I should say, and ought to go straight to bed. Take an old woman's advice, and get some sleep. Things will be clearer and better in the morning. They always are. I've had the northwest chamber made ready for Louis, Harry, and you'd better take him up at once. I don't like to see you looking so pale, my dear," she added, laying her kind old hand affectionately on Hood's shoulder. "You go up with Harry and get to sleep as soon as you can. We can't afford to have our future district attorney upset and made ill, perhaps. We are all very proud of you, Louis, you know."

He smiled rather sadly down into her eyes and put his hand over hers, drawing it down and holding it in both of his with great tenderness.

"You're very good to me, Mrs. Carlisle," he said, gently, "and I'm glad you're proud of me. But don't take that talk of running me for district attorney too seriously. It may never come off, you know. There are better men than I in the field. You mustn't forget that." He pressed her hand a little and with a slight motion of the eyebrows and head indicated Robert Kent who was bending over his bag and rods in the corner of the hall a few paces away. "They're talking of him for it, too," he said in a voice too low to reach Kent's ears. "But it's early days yet and no one knows what will happen." With a slight sigh he released the old lady's hand and turned to Harrison. "I'd like to telephone into town before I go up, if I may," he said. "It's rather important, and I didn't quite like to do it from my own house."

"Why, certainly, old man," said Harrison, quickly. "You know where the 'phone is—right under the stair landing. Help yourself."

Peter, Robert Kent, Harrison, and his mother were all standing beside the dying embers of the fire in the living room saying "good-night" while Louis Hood was telephoning. None of them appeared to be listening, but from where they stood the one-sided conversation was quite audible.

"Murray Hill, forty thousand and six," Hood called and then in a louder voice, as the connection was evidently not of the best, he repeated, "Murray Hill, forty thousand and six," and waited.

"This was a terrible thing to happen," said Mrs. Carlisle, in a low tone, warming her hands at the fire. "I'm glad you were there, Mr. Clancy."

"Aren't you ever going to call me Peter, Mrs. Carlisle?" said that young man bending toward her. "I should think Harry and I had been friends almost long enough."

"Is this Murray Hill forty thousand and six?" asked the voice in the hall. "Is Miss Farquhar there? She is still up? Will you tell her that Mr. Hood would like to speak to her for a moment? Yes, Louis Hood. Thank you."

Peter was still talking to Mrs. Carlisle, but he was not so much engaged as to miss the quick glance which Harrison threw in Kent's direction when Hood gave the name of the lady to whom he wished to speak, nor to note the slight, involuntary frown which drew Kent's dark eyebrows together, though he was apparently absorbed in the examination of a small Chinese curio which stood on the mantel.

"Well, I don't know that it will make any special difference, my being there." Peter was continuing his conversation with Mrs. Carlisle with one eye on the two men in front of him and one ear trained

on the voice in the hall. "I'm not going to get mixed up in the case, I promise you. I'm too tired and worn out altogether." He spoke with determination, and in the meantime heard Hood speak in little disjointed sentences, with slight pauses for answers in between.

"Is that you, Sylvia?"

"Yes. Why what do you mean?"

A short silence.

"No—I sent the tickets to you yesterday. Didn't you get them? For the 'Wishing Stile'. Yes."

"Well! That's queer."

Another pause.

"No, Sylvia, really—I didn't forget. I bought them in the morning and sent them up by a messenger. I don't understand——"

"Well, my dear girl, I would apologize, of course. But I did send them. Truly I did."

"That's lucky. I'm glad you were able to get seats, after all. But, Sylvia, that wasn't why I called you up. No. Something more important. I was afraid you might see it in the morning papers and be worried."

Peter, watching by the fire, was almost sure that he saw Robert Kent clench his teeth. Hood was still speaking.

"An accident. Yes. At Mother's—at my house out here in Fern Hills. No, no, I'm quite all right. Don't worry about me. But it was rather terrible.

A man found dead on the steps of the terrace. . . . A man I used to know. He had been to see me, and I thought he had gone away. He was found by Harry Carlisle and some other men who had called to take me on that trip I told you about."

Mrs. Carlisle said something just then and Clancy lost the next few words of the conversation over the telephone, but he thought he caught the man's name, Walter Brown, though the sentences which preceded and followed it were spoken in as low a voice as would carry over the wire and he could make nothing of them.

With assurances on Hood's part that he would see her as early as possible in the morning and that there was not the least thing to be anxious about, the one-sided conversation closed and Hood returned to the living room.

Kent was still looking at the little Chinese figure on the mantel-piece which had all along engrossed his attention. It was a quaint, grotesque little figure carved in ebony, of a man seated on a box of the same dark wood, having in his hand a tiny silver knife. On the box in front of his crossed and folded knees was a little lacquered plate of fish. By twisting a small button at the side, one could make him raise the knife with a lifelike motion and apparently plunge it into the fish and lift it again to meet the head which bent forward by the same mechanism. It was a curious little toy and

perhaps deserving the close attention which Robert Kent bestowed upon it. At any rate, he did not turn his head when Hood entered the room.

"Well, Louis, are you ready for bed now?" asked Harrison in his frank, cordial voice. "I'd advise you to sleep late in the morning, if you can. There won't be anything doing till the afternoon, anyway, and——"

"I've got to go into town on the early train, Harry, I'm sorry to say," replied Hood. "But I won't disturb any one. I can get my breakfast at the station."

"Indeed you can't, Louis," said Mrs. Carlisle, with eager hospitality. "I'll have a tray brought up to your room whenever you want it. I'm always up early, myself, and it won't be the least trouble. There's a train at 8:27 that Harry usually takes when he has to go in—will that be early enough? Very well, I'll send you something at eight. That will give you plenty of time. And now, good-night, Louis. I hope you'll sleep well. Good-night, my boy."

There was something so sweet and motherly in the old lady's voice as she offered her hand that for an instant Louis Hood almost lost his self-control, and it was perhaps to hide something in his eyes, something which he could not bear to have any one see, which made him lean suddenly forward and with old-fashioned courtesy rarely seen in a

young man of this day and generation, touch the wrinkled old hand with his lips.

Peter, with all the self-consciousness of modern ideas and training, knew that he could not have imitated the gesture—not if his life had depended on it, and yet, in his heart of hearts, he felt so keen a sympathy with the sentiment that prompted it, so keen a perception of the dark cloud which was even now brooding upon the nearing future, that he could not repress a short, heavy sigh.

The sigh found its echo a little later, incongruously, in the ordinarily cheerful voice of Harry Carlisle, who, having personally disposed, for the night, of his two other guests, returned to where his mother and Peter Clancy still sat by the fire talking in low tones, discussing more in detail the rapid and terrible events of the evening.

Peter was amazed at the swift and keen deductions which the old lady drew from his statement of facts, and it taxed his ingenuity to present them in such a way as to leave her free from anxiety in Louis Hood's behalf. He was very desirous of doing this, for though he himself had known Hood not at all intimately and had no special or overpowering interest in this friend of Harrison Carlisle's, it was easily seen that he was a great favourite with Harry's mother, and Peter's admiration of, and affection for her, was such that he wished to spare her the least pain. In the circumstances, this was

a somewhat perplexing problem, and he welcomed his friend's return with a feeling of distinct relief.

"Well, Peter, old top," said Carlisle, taking his usual place on the hearthrug with his back to the dying fire, "this has been a hard evening, I'll tell the world. I can't help being glad you were on deck, but I am as sorry as the mischief that I got you out here under false pretenses. The trip up to the Club is off, of course, for the present, but I wish you'd stick around here with Mother and me to cheer us up. You'll have to be here to-morrow anyway, and I think you'd better stay on for a few days. How about it? Eh? If this queer thing of Hood's clears up to-morrow we—at least you and I—might beat it up to the Club even if Louis doesn't feel like going. I dare say Kent will come, too. There's no use giving it up altogether. What think, old Red-top?"

"Why, I'm with you, Harry, and then some," answered Peter, heartily. "I'm ashamed to say how disappointed I am. Seems sort of childish—but ever since you taught me to cast a fly—Gee, it was a long time ago, too. How many years? I hate to think! Anyhow, it was when we first graduated from old Remington's and before you went to college. That was a long time ago, Mrs. Carlisle."

"I suppose it does seem long to you," smiled the old lady, "but it seems almost like yesterday

to me. I can see you and Harry now, going off with your rods like two happy children. I'm so dreadfully sorry to have you miss your sport. I wish there were some way——"

"I say, Mother," interruped Harrison, eagerly, "what would you think of my taking old Red-top out early to-morrow morning for a hack at Mayhew's brook? It's so near, and there are some good fish in it at the beginning of the season. It's well protected. Runs all the way through the Mayhew estate till it gets to the road, and then it goes through a corner of Louis Hood's place, Peter, so you can see it isn't far off. We ought to get some sport and we could be back long before lunch. It would be better than sticking around the house, wouldn't it? What do you say, old sport? Are you game?"

Peter accepted with alacrity and for more than one reason. He had made up his mind, in coming to Fern Hills, to get a rest. He knew he needed it. He had been occupied almost incessantly for the last year and was beginning to feel the strain. In spite of which fact the events of the night had laid such hold on his imagination that he was in some doubt as to his ability to conquer, temporarily, his ruling passion and leave the strange case severely alone. Unless he was actively interested in something which would fill his mind, he knew he could not keep it from dwelling on the subject.

And there was another consideration. If he re-

frained from proceeding as if nothing of very serious import had happened, he would only add to the anxiety of Mrs. Carlisle and her son. It was best to go on as if no danger threatened any friend of theirs.

"No danger," he repeated to himself, a little later, as he slowly undressed. "I wish I were sure." He shook his head. "A man—a strange man—a man armed with a pistol—has his throat cut and his neck broken—with no one anywhere near him. . . . Oh, Pete, cut it out. Cut it out! It's no business of yours. You're going fishing in the morning, early. Just remember that, old top, and forget the rest. Come, now, forget it. . . . Wonder what flies we ought to use. Gray-hackle, maybe—or a Blue Dun. Harry's sure to have all of 'em and he'll know the most likely kind to use here at this season."

He switched off the light and opened the window wide. A faint soft breeze stole in, stirring the muslin curtains. The moon, descending slowly in the west still threw a soft light over the quiet landscape, faintly defining the dark trees and roofs of distant houses. The sky was cloudless now, clear and darkly blue, pricked through with tiny stars.

"It'll be a fine day to-morrow," Peter thought. "We ought to have good sport if Mayhew's brook amounts to anything. The snow will be gone almost as soon as the sun gets up." Then with a

quick shifting of ideas, "I'm glad I made that diagram and the measurements of the footprints in the snow so carefully. It'll be all gone before noon to-morrow and nothing on the terrace to show—nothing to show. . . ."

With a great effort of his will, Peter put the thought away from him and resolutely tried to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

Enter—Bill

THE day, when it came, was all Peter had hoped for it. The sun was shining brightly when Harry Carlisle knocked softly on his door, arousing him instantly from a deep and troubled slumber.

Mrs. Carlisle was already up when they descended the stairs and presided with apparently unforced cheerfulness at their early breakfast. In that house, the usual routine was that which was most conducive to the pleasure of the day's sport for its young master, whatever that sport might happen to be, and Peter felt that he had done wisely in, so far as possible, making this day like all the rest.

The breakfast, though hastily prepared, was good and hearty, and beautifully served by the invaluable Hoki. Peter was aware of the charm of the established, leisurely, quiet household, even while he could not keep his mind from wandering to other matters.

"Your clever young Jap doesn't look quite well this morning," he said, casually, when the butler had taken away the fruit. "Must have had too good a time on his day off, I should think."

"Oh, nonsense, Red-top," laughed Harry, "don't tell me that even a detective could detect any symptoms of illness or notice any particular kind of a change in a face as much like a yellow mask as Hoki's is, and all other Japs, for that matter—'All coons look alike to me,'" he hummed, cheerfully, as the butler returned bearing the coffee urn.

Peter did not press the point and ate heartily, speaking to no particular purpose until the soft-footed Japanese had finished serving and left the room. Then, returning to his former speculation, he said: "Your butler isn't well, Mrs. Carlisle, you can take my word for it. I've had quite a lot of experience with Japs and Chinese, too, and I'd watch him a bit if I were you or he may quit without notice."

Harry laughed again.

"Why, Clancy, old top, Hoki's as strong as an ox and he's devoted to Mother. Isn't he, dear? He wouldn't think of leaving her in the lurch, I'm sure."

"He does look muscular, all right," said Peter, reflectively, "but he might be ill, just the same, you know. Athletes often are very subject to certain diseases—and other things."

"How did you know he was an athlete?" asked Carlisle, admiringly. "You're a wiz, Peter, you really are."

"Oh, I didn't know," said Clancy, modestly,

"it was only a guess—from the way he's built. What is he? A wrestler?"

"Yes," answered Harry, "and a peach, at that. He knows more tricks——"

"Jiu-jitsu?" asked Peter, quietly.

"Yes. He's taught me quite a lot of them. I thought I was pretty good to start with, but little as he is, he could throw me with one hand at first. I can do a lot better now."

Harry ran on in a half-boasting spirit, but Peter was not listening for the moment. He was thinking, instead, of a well-known jiu-jitsu trick—a murderous trick—one in which the victim's neck was broken by the horrible, resistless pressure of a forearm held edgewise against the throat just under the ear. So deadly was the trick that the victim was held, helpless. . . . There would be no struggle. . . .

"I'm pretty good now, if I do say it *as* shouldn't, but Louis Hood's much better, I must admit."

At these light words of Harry Carlisle's Peter's mind came back with a jerk.

"Oh," he remarked as casually as he could, "you and Mr. Hood have both been taking lessons, have you? That must have been interesting—and your butler must be the sort of man you'd hate to lose. Does he have a regular class? Maybe I'd like to join."

"No," Harry answered the question. "He just

taught Louis and myself a little last summer. Louis was out here then. It was before his mother's death and Hoki used to go over there once a week in the mornings when he hadn't much to do. I never saw them at work together but I tried to take a fall out of old Louis late in the summer, and believe me, he could put it all over me."

Peter suddenly pushed back his plate.

"Come on, let's get out, Harry," he said, hurriedly, with a little forced laugh. "Aren't you ready yet? He eats too much, Mrs. Carlisle, doesn't he? He's losing his figure already."

"Nothing of the kind," retorted Harry, indignantly. "I'll bet I can walk you off your feet, skinny as you are. Come on, old top. Goodbye, Mother. We'll be back in time to have the trout for lunch—if we get any."

"Remember what I said last night, Peter," cautioned Mrs. Carlisle as Clancy drew back the chair for her to rise. "Get on the stream first and keep ahead. Don't forget."

"Now, Mother," said Harry, laughing, "don't you play favourites. I'm letting Peter take my best rod and I'll give him first chance—but if he doesn't get anything in the first mile——"

True to his promise, when, after a half hour's walk the two young men reached the brook at the upper limits of the Mayhew estate, Harry set up

the rods and let Peter precede him down the stream.

It was a very engaging, promising-looking little brook. Swift water, increased by the melting snow, sang and bubbled over rocks and spread into gleaming pools where the early slanting rays of light struck through the budding branches of tall trees and gleamed on the brilliant green of moss, soft as velvet, carpeting the steep slant of the little gorge.

There was something infinitely beautiful in the promise of the tender fringe of green along the banks, seen against the whiteness of the snow which still lay in the shadowed portions of the wood, winter's last challenge flung into the lap of the waiting spring.

The upper reaches of the stream were rather heavily overgrown, and Peter lost all sense of other cares in the absorbing one of watching his flies as they slid lightly through from riffle to riffle and into the pools beyond. What thrill in the world could equal that with which he saw the first trout of the season flash upward with a gleam of silver and take the fly, felt the quick tug at the line, heard the sharp buzz of the reel as the fish, a good one, judged by its spirit and speed, made swiftly down the stream.

"I've got one on," whispered Peter, excitedly, playing from the reel with wily caution. "Feels like a pippin, too. See there!"

The fish broke, flinging a spray of diamond drops into the clear, mild air, his rainbow sides flashing like jewels.

"Drop your tip," called Harry, who had come quite close. "Don't let him break again, its too dangerous in such a stream as——"

The line fell slack.

"Oh, Lord, Red-top, he's off. Too bad! He was a beauty. If you'd only——"

"Can the post-mortems, Harry, please," laughed Peter, ruefully, reeling in his line. "I know I'm not such an old Izaak Walton as you are, but—— Oh, hang it all! I've lost the cast! Now isn't that a darn shame?" He spoke with sincere regret, for the tackle belonged to Harry and a friend's tackle is always sacred.

"Never mind, old man. Got plenty more," said Carlisle, cheerfully. "Just let me have your line. Humph! Leader's busted. Let's try another."

He took from his pocket a small circular metal box in which a number of leaders were smoothly coiled upon a damp piece of felt, and selecting one, bent it to the end of Peter's line. He attached two more flies to this and they proceeded down the stream.

But luck was against Peter. Again a fish took his fly and again, with the perversity of unpropitious fate, the leader broke.

"Go ahead, Harry," said Peter, disgustedly, "I'm a dub. No use wasting time on me. Leave me

another leader and a couple of flies and beat it. I'll follow you as soon as I can get rigged up again."

"All right, old top," said Carlisle with unabated cheeriness, flinging the leader box and fly book at Peter's feet. "I'll go on slowly, and if you don't catch up with me, I'll wait for you down at the road. Not at the first road, you understand. The brook runs under a bridge there and into the back edge of Louis's grounds. He and Mayhew have both given me permission to fish, and everybody around here knows me, so if you meet anybody, just tell 'em that you are a friend of mine, that I'm on ahead, and they won't make you any trouble. You'll find a lot of likely pools on Louis's place and there are a good number of fish, too, though of course they're mostly small. However, we'll probably be able to pick up quite a bunch, over-size. I'll fish along through there and wait for you at the second bridge. Stream runs back into the Mayhew place again, but it isn't worth trying it any farther. It spreads out there and is pretty shallow, and thick with alders. Second bridge, you understand. All right. So long, old chap. Good luck."

And Harrison went on down stream, working his flies through narrow channels between rocks, around partially submerged, many-clawed branches, over shallows and into pools with an expert's consummate skill.

Peter watched him with almost envious ad-

miration until he was lost to sight around a turn of the winding brook.

"Small chance for me," he thought as he selected a new leader and another cast, "Harry goes over a stream with a fine-tooth comb. But, thank heaven, most of the joy of fishing is fishing—messing around in the water—hearing the birds and the quietness—and watching the scenery go by."

He followed along down, happily, through the gorge, not getting many rises but having, as he would have expressed it, a bully time. When he reached the more open wood at the foot of the gorge, he caught the flash of Harrison's rod now and then, and knowing that his more expert friend considered it open enough for casting, he was betrayed into following his example, with the result that he was soon hung up in the branch of a tree. It took him so long to disentangle his flies that Carlisle had passed completely out of sight before his tackle was free again.

Undisturbed by the absolute silence and solitude of the place, warmed to the heart by the spring sunshine which shone brightly now through the silver trunks of graceful beeches, reducing the snow to little patches in the shadows of their boles, and flickering on the glittering leaves of evergreen, laurel, and rhododendron which sturdily climbed the side of the hill, Peter absorbed in the one sport for which he really cared, his mind for

the moment unfettered from the chains of the outside world, in a glow with the healthful exercise, reached the first bridge without having seen any further signs of his friend.

He paused here for a moment, gazing into the smooth water where the shadow of the bridge fell upon it, descrying after a time a number of darting, slightly darker shadows, a small school of fish, feeding with heads up stream. He tried a number of casts, but, getting no rises, he concluded, for his own credit, that they must be suckers, and plunging through a thicket of young trees and undergrowth, got on the stream again.

He resolutely put out of his mind the fact that he was now on Louis Hood's place. He determined not to spoil the brief respite from his ordinary habit of thought by harking back to the events of the preceding night. The pools were many and deep, as Carlisle had described them, and looked most promising, but try as he would to concentrate on the pleasure of the moment, he found that the tall, dark, weeping hemlocks which abounded in this part of the wood cast a disproportionate amount of shadowy gloom upon his mind; he felt a chill which was hardly to be accounted for by the thin carpet of snow which in this sheltered spot, dim with the ancient trees, was as smooth and untouched by the ardent spring sun as if it had but now fallen from the lowering sky of yesterday.

In an effort to dispel the vague feeling of trouble and oppression which was gradually falling upon him, he began to whistle softly under his breath—

Eve cost Adam just one bone.

He got no further—the whistle died upon his lips. Close in front of him, as he turned a bend of the stream where a small, steep shoulder of hill slanted upward on his right, he was aware of a crouching figure stealing stealthily down through the thick undergrowth from the direction of the narrow road he had crossed a little while before.

With a caution which was an integral part of his nature he stepped behind the close, drooping branches of a hemlock, and waited.

The figure, noiseless as a shadow, came on down the slope. When it reached the level of the stream, it stood erect at last and discovered itself to be that of a huge old man. He was roughly dressed in old, faded trousers and a gray woollen shirt open at the neck. He wore no hat, and the breeze, which sighed through the evergreen copse, stirred the thick, coarse gray hair upon his head and the wild, heavy gray beard which fell on his broad, brown breast. Peter noted the tremendous height and breadth and the rugged carriage of the man with a grudging admiration, and then suddenly smiled to himself. The man's object in coming there so stealthily had unexpectedly revealed it-

self, for he carried in his hand an old bamboo pole.

"I sure am obsessed with one idea," thought Peter with a sharp sense of relief. "He's only just an ordinary poacher taking advantage of the family not being here and the place practically closed up. Wonder what he'd say if I jumped him."

The man, after a cautious glance all about, seated himself on a fallen log and drawing a tobacco tin from his pocket, took from it a wriggling angle-worm and proceeded to affix it to his hook.

"Barnyard hackle," said Peter to himself, still watching from his post of vantage. "He's no sportsman, that's plain, but I'll bet——"

The man had thrown in his line with a careless sweep of his hand. The unpleasant, succulent bait had scarcely danced down into the pool below when there was a flash of silver, a quick twitch of the bamboo pole, and a fine rainbow trout lay flopping on the bank.

"Good work!" cried Peter, forgetting everything else in the excitement of the moment. "He's a beauty. I'd no idea they'd run that large in this little stream."

He had left the hemlock covert and unmindful of the possible effect of his sudden appearance had advanced into the open.

With a rough oath the old man sprang to his feet and, huge hands clenched, stood at bay.

"Who are you?" he cried, angrily, his eyes swiftly travelling over Clancy from head to foot, "I don't know you," he added with a look of contempt for Peter's slender proportions.

"No, you don't," said Peter, cheerfully, "but I know a good fish when I see one. My, but he's a peach, all right. Are there many more at home like him?"

The man's hands slowly unclenched. This was no new keeper, no game warden, no narrow-minded stickler for the rights of the fish to no other diet than fuzzy, indigestible flies, that was plain. His heavy bronzed features relaxed and he favoured Peter with a slow grin.

"Plenty of good fish in all the brooks around here," he asserted, gruffly, "but you can't expect to get 'em with that nonsense." He pointed to Harrison's favourite rod and the flies which dangled from it and which were caught in by Peter's hand. "How many you got?" asked the old man, pointedly.

Peter had to admit that his creel was empty.

"You see," said the old man, picking up the gasping trout and exhibiting it before he stuffed it simply and briefly into his enormous pocket. "Let every man fish his own way, I say. If you want to look nice and fish for exercise, all right, but if you fish for fish——" He left the rest of the sentence to be taken for granted.

Peter laughed aloud, and almost instantly a voice

hailed from behind a close group of evergreens a little farther down the brook.

"Hey! Red-top," it called, "come along with those leaders. I've lost another cast and a corker of a fish to boot, dammit!" and Harry Carlisle followed his voice around the bend in the stream.

"Why, hello," he exclaimed when he saw that Peter was not alone. "Hello! Up to your old tricks again, Bill? Now you'd better look out."

He shook his head laughingly at the old man, but there was an under-current of gravity in his voice when he went on. "Don't let Mr. Hood catch you on his place. He isn't as open-minded toward local talent as I am, you know."

"I know," said the old fellow, darkly, "but he won't catch me, so don't you worry."

"He did once," hinted Carlisle, warningly.

"He did once," admitted old Bill, frowning heavily, "but he won't again. And I'm going to fish here when I like. I fished this crick before he was born or thought of—and I wouldn't be surprised if I was fishin' it a long time after he was dead."

His voice was so bitter that the tolerant smile left Carlisle's face.

"Now, look here, Bill," he said, "you and I fished together when I was a kid and all the streams about here were free. But times have changed. All this property is posted now and it's no use your getting into trouble, and you will if you keep this

up. I'll tell you what I'll do. Hood lives in town now, and I don't believe he'll mind so much. I'll see if I can't get you a permit from him as a favour to me and don't you fish here any more till I see what I can do."

"I don't want no favours from newcomers," growled the old man.

"But you'd take a little thing like that from me, wouldn't you, Bill? And it's ridiculous calling Hood a newcomer. Why, they've had this place almost ten years."

"Ten years? Humph!" grunted Bill. "What's ten years, unless you have to spend it in jail, mebbe." But he seemed a trifle mollified, and evidently felt very friendly toward Carlisle, for the heavy frown left his face after a moment and he listened with a dawning smile to Harry's angry remarks about the leaders he had brought out with him that morning.

"A rotten bunch, the whole lot of 'em," he exclaimed, after testing several which he took from the box. "I have to apologize, Peter. I thought yours broke because you hadn't got your hand in yet."

"But when you found yours went bad, too, you knew it was the fault of the leaders," laughed Peter.

"Well, anyway," Carlisle grinned, "this whole lot's N.G. and we might as well give up for the morning." He turned to the old man with a per-

suasive smile. "You don't want to fish any more just now, and you might as well come along with us, Bill."

He only wanted to extend his protection to the old fellow. He had no idea that he was doing something which would have a far-reaching effect on the lives of many people, on some he counted as his friends, on some whose faces he had never seen. He waited for the old man's answer.

"All right, I'll come with ye," said old Bill.

And what was written was written.

CHAPTER VIII

"Cherchez la Femme"

A FEW moments later the strangely assorted trio reached the narrow road which they had crossed before higher up and which formed the western boundary of the Hood estate. As they walked along the rough, uneven way, Clancy caught glimpses on his left between the trees of the long gray façade of the house. Only small portions of it were visible, some of the dormers in the high, hipped roof and the thick, squat chimneys from which, as yet, no smoke was rising. He only glanced at it in passing, realized it was quite near this rough untravelled road, and hurried on after his companions.

In a minute or two he caught up with them as they reached another road, slightly wider, but scarcely better paved than the one they had just left and running east and west at right angles to it.

"Listen to this, Red-top," said Harry, stopping short and turning toward Peter. Obviously, to that young man's keen eye, Carlisle was with difficulty keeping down a rising excitement. "Hear what a funny thing happened to Bill when he was coming

up from the village about seven o'clock last night. Tell him about it, Bill."

"Why, I was just tellin' Mr. Carlisle," said the old man, with an embarrassment which was, perhaps, accounted for by the necessity of making a long speech to a stranger. "It was a kinda queer thing happened right along here last night." He coughed a little and spat into the bushes. "I was comin' up from the village over there," he pointed toward the east along the road they had just entered, "an' was a little below the brow o' the hill, ye see, when I heard a woman screechin' to beat the cars. I stopped dead at the first yell an' listened. Then she screeched again, an' I hustled up the hill's fast as I could go. 'Twan't no common screech. Sounded like she was in trouble, all right, an' I made the best time I could, but mebbe I ain't's good at runnin' as I am at fishin', fer when I got to the top of the hill I couldn't see nuthin' movin' on the road. It got dark right after sunset last night, you remember, and I couldn't see s' very fur, so I pasted along towards this way down the level road, hard's I could pelt, and I didn't see nuthin' at all till I got almost here. Then I seen a man come out o' the road back of us, goin' fer all he was worth."

"The road we've just come down?" asked Clancy.

"Yes, sir. He come out o' that there road an' shot around the corner of this one, away from me, y'understand, like a rabbit. An' I'd no sooner

lost sight of him than I heard an auto start up. An' that's all there was to it. Sounds like a likely story, don't it?" he concluded, the uncertainty deepening in his strongly marked face.

"You're sure it was a woman you heard?" asked Clancy with a puzzled frown.

"Sure ez shootin'. She had a strong voice but 'twas high pitched an' I think it would 'a' been—oh, you know, kinda pretty—if she hadn't been so skeered."

"*Cherchez la femme*," said Carlisle in a low voice to Peter. Clancy nodded and spoke again to the old man.

"You heard a woman, but saw a man," he said, slowly. "How do you account for that?"

"I don't account fer it," answered Bill, diffidently. "I'm just tellin' you the facts."

"It was pretty dark last night at seven o'clock," persisted Peter, "how can you be sure it was a man you saw? Were you very close to him?"

"Well," said Bill, as if the idea struck him for the first time, "I dunno exactly how I know. It was dark, as you say, and I wasn't s' very clost. He had on some kind of a long coat that might 'a' been a skirt, mebbe, but he run like a man an' he looked like a man an' dogged if I don't think he was a man."

"Sounds like good reasoning to me," said Carlisle, smiling, "only you say he didn't scream like a man."

"No, he couldn't 'a' done the screamin'. I figgered there was a woman summers about that I didn't see." Bill, though somewhat abashed, could scarcely fail to feel flattered by the interest exhibited both by Mr. Carlisle and his friend in the tale of his adventure.

"Was the person you did see too tall to be a woman?" Clancy still persisted.

"N-no. S'fur's I could tell he wasn't very tall," answered the old man, scratching his head, "an' anyhow, there must have been two of 'em, fer the screechin' was much nearer to me than the man could have been."

"Well, what did you do, Bill?" asked Harry with lively curiosity. "When you saw the man and heard the car go off, did you lose all interest in the damsel in distress?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Carlisle. Them screams sounded too—too—awful scared, y'know. I went back there a piece," Bill pointed toward the east, "an' listened. I didn't hear nuthin' but I kinda scratched 'round in the bushes a little, about where I thought the noise came from."

"Did you find anything?" asked Carlisle, eagerly.

"Not a durned thing. Wasn't no woman there, I was sure. I searched all through the bushes, right up to the fence, but there wasn't nobody there so I kinda figgered that whatever the trouble was, it went off in the automobile an' I give the

thing up an' went on home. But it was a funny thing to happen in a place like this, now wasn't it? I been thinkin' about it a lot. What d'ye suppose 'twas all about now?" If the old man was as ingenuous as he appeared, the incident, for some reason, had obviously made a deep impression on his mind.

"What do you think, old top?" asked Harry, looking sidewise at Peter.

"Why, I don't know. Sounds awfully queer to me," answered Peter, readily. "Suppose you show us where you think the woman was," he suggested.

"Yes, do, Bill. The whole thing's as thrilling as a dime novel," said Carlisle, quick to catch the under-current of seriousness in Peter's tone.

The old man needed no persuasion, apparently. He led the way at once along the road which formed the southern boundary of the Hood place.

Clancy touched Harrison's arm, holding him back a pace or two.

"Does he know about what happened in there last night?" he asked below his breath, nodding in the direction of the house.

Carlisle shook his head. "Not that I know of," he answered in the same guarded tone.

Peter again nodded his head and caught up with the old man.

"Was it as far along as this?" he said.

"Just a bit futher. About here, fer's I could

judge." Bill stopped when they had advanced a few hundred feet and pointed to the shrubs which grew along a brick wall on the left side of the road.

Peter looked on beyond the wall and could see, through a plantation of young firs inside it, the upper stories of the Hood house some little distance away. Glancing up at the sun, he realized that it was the south end of the house at which he looked, the end where was the main entrance and the terrace on which . . .

"The screams come from along in here summers," Bill was saying. "Course I can't be sure, to a few dozen yards or so——" He stepped in among the bushes as he spoke.

"Talk to him," whispered Peter, hurriedly, to Carlisle. "Keep him from walking around as much as you can. I want to have a look——"

Peter went on a few paces more along the road and then plunged into the bushes. They were not so tall as to hide him completely from observation, but many of them were young evergreens and they formed a fairly effective screen for his movements. He worked his way through between the shrubs, scanning eagerly the surface of the ground.

The snow, wherever it was sheltered from the sun, still lay in moist, white patches upon the greening grass, and everywhere he found huge footprints breaking into it, mute evidence of the thoroughness of old Bill's search. The cries must have

made a deep impression on the old man's mind unless he had some other reason for being there. This thought did not cross Peter's mind at the time. It was only afterward that it occurred to him to wonder. . . .

Searching every tell-tale spot of snow, he made his way along the wall farther and farther from his companions, and still he found Bill's heavy footprints. He judged that he had arrived nearly opposite the main entrance of the house when suddenly he came upon something which, in spite of the old man's story, perhaps because of its incongruity in that place, filled him with a feeling of surprise.

There, quite clear upon the snow, was the print of a woman's shoe. It was small and delicately pointed, with a tiny, almost semi-circular heel mark driven deep into the yielding surface of evanescent white carpet, which had preserved it until now. In a few hours at the most it would be gone for ever.

Almost instinctively, Peter drew a notebook from his pocket and made a careful diagram of the print, supplementing it with a series of measurements, minute in their accuracy. Then, since the toe was pointed toward the wall, he searched again in that direction.

Immediately before him was a young fir, taller and broader than any of its fellows, with thick-growing branches sweeping the ground. It threw so strong a shade that the patch of snow beyond

it was of considerable area. Peter noticed this at once. Here, if anywhere——

Ah, there they were. Not one but several, lapping and overlapping and pointing several ways. They were not scraped and broken as if there had been a struggle. Rather, it looked as if the woman had hidden herself from the road behind this lusty young fir, had stood there some moments and then gone back the way she came.

Was she fleeing, hiding from someone? And why had she screamed? Was there any connection between the alarming circumstance which had so intrigued the huge, rough old man, and the tragedy which had occurred nearly at the same hour, perhaps, at the great house over there behind the trees? Or was it only a coincidence? Two unrelated events which bewildered and puzzled.

Mechanically, Peter went on with his search. He was close to the wall now, an old wall of warm red brick, not more than breast high and built more for ornament than for protection, Peter thought, for he had noted that it ended at the southwest corner of the estate. From there, along the western edge, there had been nothing except a heavy planting of shrubs and trees.

Peter leaned upon the wall and looked over, considering deeply within himself. In the shadow of the wall was a long, unbroken line of white, but beyond it the ground slanted upward and for a

space was free of bushes and, lying as it did in the full face of the southern sun, the snow had melted completely away and the thick turf showed green with spring. From this point the house could be seen more clearly across the wide, slanting lawn. The entrance was easily discernible between the trees though the bottom part of the door and the terrace were still hidden by the lower shrubs.

"Well," said Peter to himself after scanning the prospect for a long moment, "if the woman had any connection with that job (and for the life of me I can't see how she had), one thing is plain: She didn't get over the wall. It's pretty high for a woman to climb and if she did, she must have landed where the snow would show her up. It would take a pretty tall man to jump from the top of the wall and land clear over where his footprints wouldn't show. And there isn't a mark in sight anywhere inside the wall. This seems to be the end of this trail—no use spending any more time——".

Peter's investigation had been conducted so swiftly that only a few moments had elapsed before he again joined Harrison Carlisle and the old man. He had found no other traces of the woman anywhere. There was a good deal of open space and the turf was far too thick to retain impressions. Whatever other record of the story there had been had vanished with the morning's sun.

As soon as Carlisle caught sight of Peter, he raised

his eyebrows, questioning. Peter nodded slightly with a gesture of caution and the two understood each other.

"We haven't found a single trace of any feminine thing," said Carlisle at once, "and I think Bill's been dreaming. Get any home-brew down in Fern Hills last night, Bill?" he added, laughing.

The old man shook his head.

"You can laugh all you like, Mr. Carlisle," he said. "I was cold sober. I callate to get drunk at home these days on my own private stock. I don't take no chance of gettin' poisoned with wood alcohol like y' read about in the papers. Well, gentlemen," he went on after a moment's hesitation, "I guess I'll be gettin' along home."

"All right, Bill," said Carlisle, "we go the other way. Now remember what I say, wait till I get you a permit before you go on Mr. Hood's land again."

"I'll do it for you, Mr. Carlisle," said the old man with a return of his grudging surliness, "but I ain't afraid o' any of these here newcomers, and Mr. Louis Hood's never got no change out of me, so fur."

He was still muttering angrily to himself as he left them and went westward along the road.

"He's a queer customer," said Peter as he and Carlisle turned in the other direction. "Seems to have a grudge against Mr. Hood."

"Yes," Harry replied to the upward inflection of the last sentence, though it was hardly a question. "Bill has an old tumble-down blacksmith shop on the back edge of Louis's property and Louis has done everything in the world to get him to sell it, but he won't, just out of his feeling of spite against all newcomers, as he calls them. They've had some pretty hard words about it, and then Louis did come down on the old man with a rather heavy hand about his poaching. He's fished every stream around here all his life, has old Bill Brown."

"Bill—who?" asked Peter, sharply.

"Brown," answered Carlisle, quickly, and then repeated more slowly, "Bill—Bill Brown."

CHAPTER IX

The "Farnsworth Link"

PETER stopped in his tracks and the two men looked at each other in silence for a moment. Then Carlisle repeated the name again.

"Brown," he said, confusedly. "It didn't occur to me . . . the name of the mur—— of the man who died last night."

Clancy looked at him, sharply.

"You think the man was murdered, Harry?"

Carlisle hesitated, and then—

"Yes," he said, firmly. "In spite of what you said about there being no one anywhere near him; in spite of the evidence of my own eyes that the snow about the body was undisturbed, except by the man's own footprints, I can't believe that the injuries he sustained were self-inflicted." He paused an instant, looking at his friend questioningly, searchingly. "What do you think, yourself, Peter? Tell me honestly."

"There's no use in leaving you unprepared for what the inquest is sure to prove, with that doctor and Inspector Winkle on the job," said Peter, after a little thought. "There's no possible doubt about

the facts. The man was murdered." He spoke the words with a solemnity which left no room for uncertainty as to the sincerity of his conviction.

Carlisle nodded slowly, gravely.

"Just my opinion," he said, with an anxious frown. "It's a damned unpleasant thing to be mixed up even as little as we are—a terrible thing for Louis—on his own doorstep—awful. . . ." He was silent for a little then he went on: "Tell me, Peter, have you any idea, any conception as to how the thing was done? It seems inconceivable——"

"It's puzzling, puzzling as the devil, I admit," answered Peter, slowly. "I don't see, yet, just how the thing was pulled—or why. I had a sort of hunch this morning—given a tall, very strong man . . . and—another idea. But don't let's speculate now and waste time, old chap. The snow's melting more every minute."

Harrison's eyebrows shot up at the apparent irrelevance of the remark. "Why the snow?" he asked. "What has that——"

But Peter interrupted impatiently:

"It's our only chance of proving your friend Brown's story, don't you see? I want to find out if there really was a man in the Hood place last night—a small man, in a long coat—you get me, don't you? I want to find out if the man Brown says he saw coming out of that road over there

had been on Hood's property—I want to know more about the car Brown said he heard: where it went and why it was on this bad road when there are so many good ones around here—and I want to know more about Brown himself. You can tell me as we go. There's a lot to do, and we must beat it, Harry. Come on, hurry up, old top."

Catching Peter's excitement, Carlisle hastened on at his friend's side answering his rapid fire of questions with wondering admiration, although he could not see, for the life of him, to what end the questions tended.

"You've lived in Fern Hills all your life, Harry?" Peter began.

"Ever since I was four years old," Carlisle replied, his breath coming quickly, owing to the speed they were making.

"Known Bill Brown since you were a kid?"

"Yes."

"Has he any children? Any sons?"

"I'm not sure now. He had a son——"

"Lost track of him?"

"I have—yes. He left here years ago. I don't know——"

"What was his name?" interrupted Peter.

The pace did not seem to have any effect on him. He was breathing as easily as if he were standing still.

"His name was—— Let me—— Why—William, I

suppose after his father, though he was always called 'Wully.' His mother was Scotch, and——"

"Not Wallie?" Peter asked, eagerly.

For the first time Harry hesitated.

"Wallie—Wully——" He tried the two names over. "I think it was 'Wully'—can't be perfectly sure—so long ago, you know."

"A kid named Walter might be called Wallie, you see," Peter elucidated, "if his mother was Scotch . . . Walter—Walter Brown."

"I see—but, Peter, what do you think?"

"I can't tell you now, Harry. I'm not clear myself—— May not mean a thing. Brown's almost as common a name as Smith, and besides, are you sure in your own mind that the dead man's name was really Brown?" He glanced searchingly at Harrison as he put the question.

"Louis said that was his name." Carlisle's tone was firm and a little indignant though his eyes betrayed the doubt which he strove, loyally, to conceal.

Peter nodded comprehendingly but pursued the subject no further.

They had reached the corner of Louis Hood's property a moment before and turned up the narrow road. As has already been stated, there was no boundary wall along this side, but the steep and rugged slant of the ground as it fell away from the road and the close planting of bushes formed a sort

of natural protection. Peter's eyes sought warily for indications that someone had left the road at any given point since the snow of yesterday. Carlisle looked, too, with all a hunter's trained observation, but his mind was distracted by the many thoughts with which Peter's questions had filled it.

"Do you doubt old Bill's story, Peter?" he asked after an interval of unproductive search.

"Part of it I know is true," said Peter with conviction. "He was all through the bushes outside the wall south of Hood's house at some time after the snow stopped falling yesterday—and it was true about the woman—I found her footprints."

"You did?" exclaimed Carlisle, stopping an instant and looking up at Peter. "You didn't say anything——"

"Not on your life, I didn't," said Peter, without pausing in his search. "But they were there all the same."

"What sort of a woman was it, Peter, could you guess?" Harrison was as excited as Peter was calm.

"She was five feet three and one eighth inches tall, had blue eyes and pink hair," said Clancy, with a hint of a smile at the look of bewilderment on his friend's face, which look changed at once to a grin when he saw that Peter was not in earnest. "Got a rise that time, didn't I, Harry? How the devil do I know what sort of a woman she was?

Except that she had very small feet, if her shoes didn't pinch, that the shoes were not designed for walking because they had very high French heels, I know nothing at all about her. As a master-mind detective I'm afraid I'm pretty punk, eh, Harry?"

"Well, part of old Bill's story is true, anyway," said Carlisle, passing the question with another grin and a wave of his hand, "and if part, why not all?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," said Peter, "but we're not having much luck, are we? These bushes with the big green leaves have kept most of the snow off the ground and they're so thick—— I'll tell you what we'd better do, Harry. Let's break in any old place and try farther over, in the hollow along this side of the brook. There'll be more snow there, and if anywhere, we'll be likely to pick up——"

"Red-top," said Carlisle, looking quizzically sidewise, "I thought you said you weren't, on any account, going to get mixed up in this case."

"I'm not," said Peter, defensively, "I'm much too tired."

"You haven't acted very tired so far," persisted Harry, following Clancy as he crashed through the bushes and slid down the damp slope into the Hood grounds.

"Well, I am tired," Peter reiterated, "and I

won't have anything to do with the damned thing after the inquest this afternoon. I deserve a rest, and I am going fishing with you, savvy? But this snow's melting so fast that somebody's got to act quick, and since this story came my way, it's up to me to investigate it and be darned sudden about it. That's plain duty. The rest is up to our friend Inspector Winkle."

"All right, old top, I see your point. And I'll be tickled to death to take you fishing. Only——"

"Only?" asked Peter as Carlisle paused.

"Nothing."

"I thought you were going to say something, old man."

"No—nothing, Peter. Come on."

Clancy needed no encouragement to proceed with his quest. Separating, they went carefully back and forth among the wet, fallen leaves, through the budding undergrowth, under the arching branches of the trees, around the small and ever smaller patches of the fast melting snow. Peter was beginning to wonder if his sense that the story of old Bill Brown was, in some way, of importance, had played him false, when he heard Carlisle's whistle. It sounded softly from some little distance, and Carlisle himself came into view around a hemlock farther up in the direction of the house. He beckoned excitedly.

"I've found it," he said, exultantly, as soon as

Peter was near enough to hear his lowered voice. "The spoor of the game, eh, Red-top? Look here." He pointed down at his feet.

Sure enough, there was a footprint. A man's footprint probably, though it was difficult to estimate the size, for even in the shade the warm sun was doing its appointed work and the snow was receding from every broken edge. The outline was vague and indeterminate, but was, undoubtedly, that of a human foot, the toe of which pointed up the hill.

"Come on," said Peter, with a short nod of satisfaction, "up the hill we go."

Suiting the action to the word, he advanced quickly up the slope, head bent, body well forward, with eyes which darted hither and thither, seeking, searching eyes; eyes from which nothing escaped.

Presently he stopped and pointed at the ground, silently calling Harry's attention to two more fast-disappearing footprints, and then went on again faster than before.

Carlisle, being of heavier build, was soon winded by the steepness of the grade and dropped a little behind. When he came up with Peter again, the latter was standing just beyond the top of the rise, beside a tall, well-grown young pine tree. Peter motioned swiftly with his hand—a gesture plainly enjoining silence and caution.

At the same instant Harrison caught the faint sound of voices not far off, beyond a thick screen of rhododendron. With the hunter's silent step, he swiftly advanced to Clancy's side.

"What is it?" he whispered in Peter's ear.

"Somebody on the terrace of the house," Peter whispered back. "It doesn't matter, only I'd rather not be seen here. Keep still and wait. And look there," he added, again pointing to the ground.

From the foot of the pine tree the slope was toward the north. This, and the fact that the shadows cast by the full-leaved bushes was very dense, had served to protect the light snow more here than elsewhere. In it, fairly distinct, were three footprints descending the hill. They lay beyond the shelter of the pine, under whose branches whatever snow had sifted through had vanished in the thick carpet of brown needles.

Peter put his hand up on the trunk of the tree and leaned around it, his face toward the house, listening. They had approached so near that the voices were easily distinguishable, though the words did not reach them. After a short time the voices ceased, the front door of the house closed, and an instant later a car started at the east end of the terrace and sped swiftly away down the drive.

"Now," said Peter, "I guess we're free to investigate. Ugh!" as he straightened up, "I'm not free

exactly. Look at my hand, it's stuck fast to the tree. Gee, aren't these pines sticky things! I've got it all over my coat. This tree's all barked up with little cuts and the sap's running out in big fat drops. I certainly am a mess."

But Carlisle was not listening to Peter's disgusted comments on the gumminess of pine trees in general and of this one in particular. Instead, he was still looking through the tall bushes toward the house, which was quite near at hand, though it was only possible to catch small glimpses of the southern façade, and the terrace was completely hidden by its row of pointed cedars.

"Peter," he said, hesitatingly, his face full of concern and an anxiety which he had been fighting ever since the previous night. "Peter, old top, I hate to say it, but I wish you'd let yourself go and take up this damned thing seriously. I've been thinking—and thinking—till my head aches—and I can't help being worried about. . . . It's all so fearfully peculiar—all the circumstances. This perfectly unknown man—and Louis entirely alone in the house. . . . He and I have always been friends—and my mother was devoted to old Mrs. Hood. . . . I can't help being afraid. . . ."

He paused a moment and then turned to Clancy with a pleading seriousness which sat strangely on his whimsical, careless face.

"I'm almost sure that one of those voices we just

heard was Louis's. It's time for him to be back and I think he's in the house now. Wouldn't it be possible for you to go in and offer——"

"Don't see how it could be done, old man," he said, slowly. "It would look—— Oh, you must see how it would look. I can't butt in now, anyway. Perhaps later, if there seems to be any occasion. And I think you're worrying needlessly. They haven't got anything definite on Mr. Hood. The whole thing's too queer, and our friend Inspector Winkle will find it a hard matter to prove anything further than the bare fact of murder. I'm all at sea myself—though I have an idea or two rattling around in my old bean. . . . I don't see now just where they'll lead—and it's a puzzle to get a theory that'll fit all the facts. All the facts," he repeated, slowly, thoughtfully, his keen mind losing, momentarily, all consciousness of his immediate surroundings and concentrating itself on the problem which more and more, against his inclination and will, insidiously piqued his interest and professional curiosity.

"Well, of course, Peter, I don't want to try to force you," said Harry, disappointedly, "but I can't help wishing—— Oh, well, never mind, I'm sure you know best, old top. Come on, let's be moving. Where do we go from here?"

"We'll have a better look at those tracks," answered Peter, rousing himself from a brown study, "and then I guess we might as well be getting

along home. Look out for this tree. It's full of juice," he added. "The bark is cut in several places. Queer cuts, too. What do you suppose could have made 'em? There's one down here on one side of the tree and another, higher up, on the other, just above that second branch, do you see?" He pointed to a long, clean, fresh cut which looked as if it had been made with a sharp knife, on the south side of the trunk, about ten inches above his head.

"I don't know what did it, Peter," said Harry, absently. "No animal that I know of would try to girdle a tree like that. I can't be sure. I'm not a nature-fakir, you know. But let's get on, old chap, if we aren't going in to see Louis. I must confess I'm not keen to run the risk of being seen prowling around the place."

"Right-o," said Clancy at once, stepping carefully around the patch of snow which had previously engaged his attention, until he was close enough to the footprints for his purpose. "Hm—pretty long feet, I should say, if I didn't know that the snow had melted away around the edges. Darn it all, I wish we had come upon 'em sooner. It's impossible to tell much about 'em now. Well, old man, I guess we can't do much here. You lead along back the shortest way to the road."

Harry complied with a sense of relief, and he led the way down the steep incline at a rapid though

silent pace. Taking the pine tree as a starting point, a rough, little-used path was faintly discernible. Peter, following, glanced carefully about him for signs that someone had passed that way before and recently, but aside from the footprints already noted, which they passed farther on, he found nothing except a long sliding scrape in the soft earth at the steepest pitch of the descent. It seemed to indicate that someone, someone in a hurry probably, had almost lost his footing upon the slippery, clayey ground and rotting leaves.

The rough little trail crossed the comparatively open and level space at the foot of the slope and again led up through a slight opening in the thick shrubbery which bounded the Hood estate. Advancing quickly along it, they found themselves in the road just above the point where they had entered.

"If we'd known this little path, we'd have made better time," said Peter, as he stepped into the road. "Somebody did know about it, evidently. I suppose Bill Brown knows every inch of this countryside—— I wonder. . . . But never mind that now. I want to see just where that car was that he spoke about, if there are any signs of it left. Hurry up, old top."

Almost at a run they descended the steep, narrow road and did not slacken speed until they reached the corner. Here Peter paused and looked about him. He could see only a short distance along the

road to the right, for it curved sharply from west to south and the view was obstructed by the undergrowth and a number of small trees.

Clancy had stopped only a second.

"This way, Harry," he said, motioning with his right hand. "Must have been around that bend, or Brown would have seen it before he got this far." He looked at the rutted road bed as they went swiftly on. "Not much traffic through here, is there?" he remarked. "We haven't seen a soul, except Brown, on the road and there are only one or two fresh wheel marks."

"Hardly any one comes through here," said Harry, "and I should think no one would willingly come this way in a car. There's a good macadam road, the one we came up this morning, just beyond Wallingford's place here," he motioned toward the left, "and this runs into it a little farther up the hill. There are only the three places on this little cut-off: Wallingford's, here; Hood's, farther back; and the Mayhew place you remember is here on our right. None of them has an entrance on this bad road and unless someone had lost the way——"

"Perhaps someone did lose the way," said Peter, stopping short just beyond the turn. "At any rate, there has been a car this far. Look," and he pointed down to the unmistakable track of tires in the damp earth.

The snow here was completely melted away, but

the ground beneath it had not been frozen hard when the snow fell. The road bed was now quite soft, and if Brown's story could be trusted, evidently had been on the previous evening, for the tire marks were plain to be seen.

Peter motioned Carlisle aside while he carefully and quickly examined them.

"Farnsworth Link Non-skids," he muttered half to himself. "Most popular expensive tire on the market. Must have been a good car . . . and the tires pretty nearly new. See how sharp the pattern is here—and over there." He moved restlessly up and down and from side to side of the road. "I have it all clear," he said after a moment. "A child could tell what happened. He came down this far"— again he pointed—"backed in over those dead leaves, probably; turned, and ran the car off here to the side behind these bushes. Must have been a heavy car and must have stayed here some little time. See how she sunk in here in the ditch where the ground was wet? Then he went back up the hill, of course, since there weren't any tracks beyond this point. So far Bill Brown's story is O-K. There was a woman and there was a man, and also there was a car. But where does that take us?"

"If you mean the road," said Carlisle, eager to be of service, "it takes us into the main road from Fern Hills to Lounsberry, where the good road

ends. We might as well go home that way. It's just as short from here as to go back by Louis's and the walking is better after we pass this first stretch."

"All to the good," said Peter, and without more words he went rapidly forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the surface of the road bed.

He said nothing more until they reached the spot where the narrow road debouched at a slant upon the stone-paved highway. He had found the characteristic "Farnsworth Link" more or less continuously all along the way, two tracks often overlapping each other, but at the intersection of the road the two tracks became distinct, one turning to the right and the other to the left at the point where they were lost upon the macadam pavement.

"He came one way and went back another," said Peter, half aloud. "Now, which way did he come and which way did he go?" He cast back a few paces, Carlisle following every movement with intense interest. He could not see, in his own mind, how Peter could attach any special importance to the movements of the mysterious car, but this glimpse which he was having into the methods of a competent detective filled him with almost pleasurable thrills.

"I've got it," said Peter in a moment. "You see this place where the marks lie one on top of the other? Now follow the line from here on. It's

nearly continuous, and the top track leads to the right."

"But that's toward Lounsberry," cried Harry, "and it's there the good road stops. What could any one want to go to Lounsberry for?"

"What kind of a place is it?" asked Peter, quickly.

"Why, just a little village on a branch line of the D. L. and W. There's nothing there but a mill and a few cottages."

"Is it far off?"

"Not more than a mile or so."

"What is there between here and there? Any large places?"

"No, nothing but farms as I remember," said Carlisle. "Look here, Peter, what do you think——"

"Don't ask me what I think while I'm doing it, old chap," answered Peter, with a twinkle in his keen blue eyes. "I've got a sort of hunch, but I don't just know what it is. Only, for my own satisfaction I'd like to see for myself what's along this road. D'you mind beating it over to Lounsberry with me? It may not amount to a hill of beans, but I'd just like to know what chances there were for someone to have seen this car, and perhaps what sort of person or persons were in it."

Harry agreed readily. He was glad of each new indication that Clancy was becoming more and more interested in the case. He knew enough of his friend's ruling passion to hope, in spite of his

protests to the contrary, that he would become so involved in the clues of his own finding that he would not be able to give it up. So far he had no suspicion that Peter might turn up anything inimical to Hood's interests. He had no real doubt as to Louis's innocence, but he could not reason himself out of the feeling that there was a mystery here which might prove menacing to his friend's peace of mind, and no one would be so likely to unravel the tangle as Peter Clancy.

"And this is the end of the road," said Peter, glancing about him when they reached the small railroad station at Lounsberry. "Well, we haven't made much on this bet, I'll tell the world. Nothing but those small farms along the road, and the houses well back. Everyone about ready for bed probably at seven o'clock last night. Very little passing at that time, I should judge by the few flivvers and teams we have met. Well, it was on an off chance, anyway. Sorry I've taken you—— Oh, my eye, Harry!" he broke off, excitedly. "Here's something, anyway."

Peter stooped down and indicated with extended forefinger. In the unpaved turning space alongside the tiny station, partly obliterated by passing wheels, was the tell-tale Farnsworth Link.

"I don't make much of that," objected Carlisle, as he followed Peter toward the station entrance. "Whoever drove the car didn't know

the country very well, got into the bad road down there and went the wrong way when he came back to the good one. This was the first real easy place to turn and he may not have realized before——"

"You wouldn't need to run right up to the station platform to get room to turn," interrupted Peter. "See that mark just at the edge of the planks? He may have come in to ask the way. I'm going to see."

He opened the door as he spoke and entered the little waiting room, Harry following close at his heels.

"Good morning," said Peter, pleasantly, leaning down a little to look through the brass grille of the ticket window.

"Tap-tap—click-click," came from the telegraph instrument. The agent did not even turn his head.

"I beg your pardon," Peter remarked to the broad back which remained persistently turned (as is the manner of country station agents all the world over) in his direction.

Peter waited in exasperated silence till the man had finished leisurely transcribing a message, made several entries in various small books and on varicoloured slips of paper, and at last turned to the window.

"Where to?" asked the agent, yawning.

"To nowhere," said Peter, impatiently. "I just want to know how late you're on duty here."

"Six o'clock," said the man, indifferently.

"Does the night agent live near here?" asked Peter, quickly.

"Ain't any night agent," drawled the man. "Station closes at six. Have to get your ticket on the train," and he turned away from the window with the slow, bovine movement of the intellectually inert.

"Just a minute," said Peter. "Let me have a time-table if you please."

The agent slowly selected one from a pile on the shelf and wearily thrust it under the brass lattice. Peter caught it up swiftly but he did not open it until he and Carlisle were outside the station.

"There's a train to New York at 6:59," he remarked, pausing on the platform to run his eye over the time-table.

"But if you want to go to town, Peter," said Harrison in surprise, "the Fern Hills station is much nearer than this. And you aren't going to leave us to-night surely. You said——"

"I say a lot of things, Harry," said Clancy, regarding his friend with a look in which a quizzical humour and an underlying seriousness were strangely blended. "I'd have taken my oath yesterday that nothing in heaven or earth would keep me from spending the next four days fishing with you——"

"And now?" questioned Carlisle, eagerly.

"And now, I don't know, old top," said Peter,

thoughtfully. "I don't know. Hang it all!—I wonder—I wonder. . . ."

He looked down at the print of the Farnsworth Link so close to the platform edge.

"The station was closed at six o'clock last night, and there wouldn't have been any lights. No one would have gone there to ask the way. . . . There was a train to New York at 6:59. . . . I wonder."

CHAPTER X

"L. H."

IT WAS nearly lunch time when the two young men ascended the shallow steps of the comfortable old Carlisle home. They had spoken but little after they left the station at Lounsberry. Peter had fallen into a fit of deep abstraction which Carlisle considerately forebore to disturb, though he would have given worlds to know what was passing in his friend's mind.

Clancy roused himself when the door was opened by the versatile and invaluable Hoki, and it was with a face cleared of every anxiety that he met Mrs. Carlisle in the living room.

The old lady rallied them about their empty creels and pretended to think that the "rotten" leaders were only an excuse, though if any one else had cast an aspersion on Harry's skill, she would have been up in arms at once.

"Where's Kent?" asked Harrison when they had finished explaining their morning's lack of success in the sporting line. "He didn't mind our going out without him, did he, Mother? I looked in his room when I first got up to see if he'd like to go along,

and he was sleeping so peacefully I didn't have the heart to wake him. Somehow, I can't quite see him in the rôle of the man who gets the fish out of bed in the morning to catch 'em. Wouldn't think it polite to disturb 'em, I imagine," he laughed. "Doesn't he strike you that way, Peter? He's so elegant and correct. Gives plain chaps like us a lot to live up to, eh, what? I hope you explained to him, Mother——"

"Oh, I did, Harry, and he didn't mind at all. It was just as well, anyway, for he had a telephone call from his office, and had to go back for the morning to attend to some business matter that had come up unexpectedly."

"Is he going to duck this affair this afternoon? Gee, I wish I could." Harrison spoke feelingly.

"I wish you wouldn't use such expressions, Harry. They sound so very common, dear. No, Mr. Kent will be back in time for the—the inquest, which, by the way, is for three o'clock. Louis telephoned somebody in Morrisville before he left for town. They want you all over there at three. Louis said he'd be back this morning, and I tried to get him to come here for lunch, but he said that John and Eliza would be out in plenty of time to give him something to eat at his own house, and he thought he'd better——"

"Too bad for him to be lunching all alone in that spooky, shut-up house," broke in Harry, regret-

fully. "It's enough to give any one the creeps after what has happened. We'll drive over and pick him up when we go to Morrisville. I'll 'phone him right away and then we'd better change, old Red-top. We'll have time before lunch, won't we, Mother? By the way, is Rob coming back here or are we to meet him in Morrisville?"

"He said he'd meet you over there," said Mrs. Carlisle, "but I think he'll come back with you, and go up to the Club to-morrow if you decide to go. He left his tackle here, and his car, and went in by train since it's so much quicker. He hadn't a great deal of time."

"That's a good idea. I hope we can go up to the Club. Rob was almost as keen for it as old Red-top. I hope I haven't said too much about the sport up there. After our rotten luck this morning——"

Harrison talked on in his usual voluble, rambling, cheery way all the while that his mother was present. The tragedy which over-shadowed the house of their friend was scarcely mentioned at luncheon and even on the drive over to Morrisville Carlisle chatted pleasantly on indifferent topics, principally connected with sport, getting small response from Louis Hood whom they picked up according to arrangement, but, apparently, quite oblivious to his old friend's pre-occupation and anxiety. In his efforts to take Louis's mind off the puzzling and serious question in hand he was aided and abetted

by Peter, but their united efforts met with poor success. Hood spoke very little. Once he broke into some remark of Harrison's with an abruptness which showed that he was unconscious of there being any other subject under discussion.

"Did you see the paper this morning, Harry?" he asked, nervously snapping open and closing the Oxford glasses which he wore on a narrow black guard around his neck. "There was a short account——"

"Yes, we saw it when we came in to lunch, Louis, just a brief statement——"

"You didn't see the *Planet?* No. You wouldn't be likely to. One of the boys in the office showed it to Hill and Hill called my attention to it, when I stopped in there for a minute on my way out. I hope they aren't going to try to make political capital out of this unfortunate accident."

Hood spoke as if thinking aloud. He relapsed into silence after that and remained deep in troubled thought for the remainder of the way.

They reached the County Court House a few minutes before three, and found the coroner and his jury already assembled. The two policemen who had guarded the terrace on the previous night were there. Also Inspector Winkle, looking dark, heavy, and portentous. He glanced at them gravely from under his thick, bulging brows and favoured Peter with the ghost of a grim smile.

Several reporters, lured from New York more by the prominence of the man on whose property the tragedy had occurred than by any interest in the crime itself, sat at a table on one side of the bare room. One was chewing gum vigorously; another was working over a balky fountain pen, while a third was tilted back in his chair viewing the scene through sleepy, half-closed lids.

Doctor Moore and Robert Kent appeared almost immediately and the coroner proceeded at once to business.

After eliciting for the benefit of the jury the various facts of the finding of the body, he called on Dr. Bernard Moore for his testimony as to its condition and the inferences to be drawn therefrom.

The doctor made his affirmations with a clearness and conviction which left little room for doubt in the minds of the jurors.

The man had been dead not more than an hour, Doctor Moore believed. The wound in his throat might have been self-inflicted, but he had died of a broken neck, which latter fact could only be accounted for by a fall from a height or some such accident (which there was no reason to deduce), or he had been killed in a struggle with an overpowering adversary. The two injuries, taken together, would leave absolutely no room for doubt in the mind of an intelligent jury that the man had

been murdered. Thus, Dr. Bernard Moore, and thus ended his testimony.

The jury looked at each other and nodded, their minds evidently entirely made up and at rest. They were all local men and they knew Doctor Moore's ability and professional standing. The man, Walter Brown, a stranger to all of them, had been murdered, and that was the only fact in which they were especially concerned. Imperceptibly their attitude of attention relaxed, and it was only after Peter Clancy took the stand that their slow minds began to take in the fact that they were not dealing with an ordinary case, interesting on account of its being an unusual occurrence in that community, but otherwise unimportant.

Almost as soon as Peter began to speak, a change was noticeable among the gentlemen of the press. The man who had been tilted back in his chair brought his own two legs and the two front legs of the chair to the ground simultaneously, and from that moment the swift scratching of pens was audible in every pause of the proceedings.

Clancy brought out with all the force of his trained intellect the curious circumstance that, though the man had died instantly according to Doctor Moore and the evidence of himself and others, still, and in spite of that fact, there had been no sign of a struggle and there had been no footprints other than Brown's own within several yards of

the body. He made it plain that the lights on the terrace had turned the night into day; that every mark on the newly fallen snow had been clear and distinct; that both he and Mr. Carlisle were, for different reasons, trained observers and that there could be absolutely no question of this strange and peculiar fact. Peter then requested that the carefully measured diagram which he had made for Inspector Winkle be passed among the jury, that his statement might be perfectly clear to their minds, and asked them, in these circumstances, to consider whether or not a theory of suicide was not quite as probable as a theory of murder.

The paper torn from Clancy's notebook made its round. Each juryman looked at it with interest and as much intelligence as Nature had vouchsafed him. At length it was returned to Inspector Winkle, who then took up the tale.

He cross-questioned Peter first, but could not shake any of his assertions. He then repeated his queries to Harrison Carlisle, with the same result. After that he examined Robert Kent, who reluctantly admitted that the matter of the footprints had escaped his attention but that he had absolutely no doubt that the facts were as stated.

"You have heard what these gentlemen have said," Inspector Winkle turned to the jury at last, and with a gesture which was habitual to the man he wagged a blunt forefinger back and forth

on an otherwise immovable fist. "Now mark what I am going to say." His voice was fraught with heavy intent. "When I first saw the body and the tracks in the snow about it, they were all confused except this one line of footprints of the deceased, which Mr. Clancy has been telling you about—" He paused, and looked slowly along the line of faces of the jury as though he would make sure that every eye was fixed upon him—"and one other line of footprints leading straight to the body—which I ascertained to be those of the owner of the house, Mr. Louis Hood. You will take notice that all three of the gentlemen who have given their testimony in this matter are old friends of Mr. Hood's and one of them isn't perfectly sure that the conditions were as stated. He only thinks so."

The inspector paused to give the innuendo time to sink in. Then he went on:

"The man Brown was armed with a short Colt's from which one shot had been fired. I know where that was done. I found the bullet in the housekeeper's room in Mr. Hood's house. He says that Brown tried to kill himself there and that he, Mr. Hood, I mean, was so fortunate as to be able to prevent it. This might seem to indicate that Brown, being desperate, did commit suicide later. You will observe that I wish you to draw your own conclusions. I don't want to force my own opinion

on anybody. But just bear in mind that a shot was fired in the housekeeper's room, obviously from the pistol Brown carried and probably by his own hand; that some time during the interview Mr. Hood gave this man whom he scarcely knew, or hadn't seen for a long time, according to his own statement, a check for one thousand dollars."

Inspector Winkle glanced over to the table occupied by the representatives of the press to see how this shot told. The reporter from the *Planet* stopped his ruminative jaws for an instant, bit the top of his fountain pen, cast a keen look at Louis Hood and began writing again, faster than ever.

"That was a large sum, gentlemen of the jury, to give to a mere acquaintance, out of pure philanthropy, and it's enough to make us think better of our fellow men." The inspector made little attempt to conceal the covert sarcasm of this remark. "If there had been an attempt at blackmail, it might, perhaps, bear a different explanation, but at present we have no other indication of any such attempt. It seems a pity, however, that the poor fellow, Brown, didn't live to enjoy the benefit of so handsome a gift. This, in itself, might be considered a reason for his not having committed suicide, if there were no others; but, aside from the plain inference to be drawn from the testimony of Doctor Moore, the man did not shoot himself, though he was armed with a revolver, and though he died instantaneously, there

was no weapon capable of inflicting the wound in his neck found anywhere near the body. Against this you have the statement of Mr. Hood's friends about the evidence in the snow on the terrace, and you are bound to give that its proper weight. But——" Again the inspector made one of his heavy dramatic pauses. "But I beg you to remember that the snow is now entirely gone and with it all record which it might have contained. The house faces the south, the lawn and terrace are open to the sun, and the snow had almost entirely melted away before I got back there this morning. It was an advantage, in a way, for it enabled me to make perfectly sure that there was no knife or other sharp weapon anywhere near the place where the body was found; no safety razor blade, as has been suggested." Here he glanced aside at Peter Clancy, and met and held the younger man's keen blue eye with the ominous portent of his own. "Nothing, in fact, except"—he spoke very slowly, giving each word it s full weight of significance—"at a short stone's throw from the body—below on the lawn—I found this."

From his ample side pocket he drew forth a rather long paper packet. He pulled off the rubber band which held it, opened it slowly, and displayed a large clasp knife with a rough horn handle and an open blade of some three inches in length, with a keen, slightly curved cutting edge ending in a sharp point. He balanced it in his hand, and went on, looking at

it meditatively, and addressing himself to the excited jurymen.

"You will see that there are very slight—almost no traces of rust, plainly indicating that it hadn't been lying there long. You will also note that it is very sharp; and further—that there are the initials L. H. on the little plate in the centre of the handle. There's some trick about closing it that I don't understand. Perhaps you'd show us how it's done, Mr. Hood."

"I'll show you," broke in Harrison Carlisle, impetuously. "It's an ordinary fishing knife, such as we all carry. You don't have to use both hands to open it, and there's no danger of its closing on your fingers; you just press that button in the side."

"I'd rather let Mr. Hood show the jury how the trick is done, Mr. Carlisle," said the inspector, impatiently, as he put the knife into Hood's hand. "It is your property, isn't it, Mr. Hood?"

Louis Hood had been sitting forward, his elbow resting on the arm of his chair, his chin on his left hand, the fingers of which lay across and covered his mouth. His face was still, almost stony in its rigid immobility. Mechanically he took the knife, looked at it an instant, touched the spring, closed it by pressing the back of the blade against the chair arm, and with a slight nod returned it to Inspector Winkle.

"Will you please acknowledge that it is your knife?" said the old officer, severely.

Hood shifted a little in his chair and answered, "Yes, it is, or was mine."

"Why do you say 'or was', Mr. Hood?" asked the inspector, sharply. "Do you mean to imply——"

"Only that I lost it a long while ago," answered Hood, coldly. "I haven't seen it for several years."

"Can you imagine who might have had it?" Winkle's voice was as keen as his glance. "This man Brown, for instance, could he?"

Hood shook his head with every appearance of being genuinely in the dark.

"No," he said. "Walter Brown hadn't been East for nearly ten years, and it wasn't more than two or three years ago at most that I lost it."

The inspector put his thick thumb between his teeth and bit it softly and thoughtfully. The knife was opened again and passed around to the jury. Even the reporters asked for and obtained a nearer view.

When the knife came back into Winkle's possession again, he rose and signified to the coroner that he had nothing more to say. The jury filed out of the room and were gone some time.

Those most interested in the outcome awaited their return in tense silence. The faint buzz of voices from the other occupants of the room showed what an intense excitement the unexpectedly sensational disclosures had awakened.

Peter, in spite of his contention to the contrary,

had little doubt as to the conclusion which the jury would reach, since it seemed to be composed of men rather above the grade of ordinary intelligence.

He was not surprised, therefore, when they filed slowly back and returned their verdict—"Murder at the hand of person or persons unknown."

There was a loud stir in the room as soon as the verdict was announced. The reporters rushed pell-mell for the nearest 'phone, jostling each other in their efforts to be the first to spread the story, "a ripper," as one of them characterized it, in the pages of their several journals.

The room emptied itself quickly, and Carlisle found himself upon the pavement with his three friends without having any distinct idea as to how he reached there, so concerned was he in behalf of one of them.

"You'll come home with me, Louis, won't you?" he asked, pleadingly, clasping Hood's arm with a boy's impatient loyalty. "Come on, now, old man. We'll be in time for a cup of tea with Mother, only we don't have to take tea. I've got some of the old hooch left, thank God. Come on, all you fellows. Jump into the car and let's be off. Hop in, Rob, Mother's expecting you back."

"I'm sorry," said Kent, with a slightly constrained glance at Louis Hood. "I've got to get back to town to-night, and I'll probably have to stay there most of to-morrow. Some trouble about the contracts

for my silly moving-picture venture that you're always ridiculing, Harry. But I'll be out again tomorrow evening, if you don't mind, and if you should decide to go up to the Club——"

"Don't know about that," said Harrison, uncertainly. "We'll have to see. I'll 'phone you later, but come out, anyway. Sure you can't come over now?"

"No, old chap. So sorry. Please present my compliments and regrets to your mother. I'll have just time to get the 4:38, which is the next train from here. How about you, Mr. Clancy? Do you go back with Harrison or are you going in to town? If so, I'll be very glad of your company." Robert Kent habitually spoke with a certain elaboration of manner which rarely failed to tickle Carlisle's unconventional humour. He was too much concerned with the ugly turn affairs had taken to notice it now.

"You aren't going to desert us, are you, Peter?" he asked, swiftly, noting Clancy's hesitation. "Surely——"

"I'm afraid I must go back to New York, Harry," Peter said, reluctantly. "I'll explain to you as we go. We mustn't keep Mr. Kent or he'll miss his train, and I want to catch the earliest one I can make from Fern Hills. I'll just grab a few things and say good-bye to Mrs. Carlisle, and——"

"If you're not going with me, Mr. Clancy," said Robert Kent with polite regret, glancing at his watch,

"I'll be getting on. Good-bye. I'll come out and pick up my traps to-morrow in any case, Harry, but you'll 'phone me. I'm afraid I must hasten a bit. Good-bye."

He raised his hat at arm's length and hurried off without offering his hand to any of them, the omission of which ceremony caused Harrison Carlisle some surprise.

"What's got into Kent?" he exclaimed as they took their places in the car. "He seemed awfully queer, somehow. Did you notice it, Louis?"

"Yes," replied Hood with more than a touch of bitterness in his low, deep voice. "He believes what Inspector Winkle was at such pains to suggest—that Walter Brown came to the house to blackmail me and that I was somehow concerned in his death. He didn't want to shake hands with me, Harrison—and he is naturally too courteous to wish to make it unmistakably apparent. God!" Louis Hood shut his teeth upon the word and clenched his hands in a stern effort to maintain his self-control. His thin face was very white.

"Oh, damn it all!" said Harrison, miserably, under his breath.

"Take me to my own house, if you'll be so good, Harry," said Louis Hood, quietly, after a short interval in which they had been travelling swiftly toward Fern Hills. "It's awfully good of you to want to take me to your mother's, but I'll be better

by myself, and I'm not going to have you troubled further by this wretched business. It's bad enough as it is."

"Oh, don't think of me, Louis," cried Carlisle, all the carelessness gone from his round, honest face. "Think of yourself, man. Get all the comfort you can out of your friends. It's a rotten business altogether, but take it easy—take it easy. It isn't so serious, after all. They can't prove anything against you, and——"

"Supposing they can't," said Hood, bitterly. "Think of the scandal in the papers—the blot on my name. Unless I can clear it, I'll be a marked man all my life. I can never——"

"Look here, Louis." Carlisle slowed down on the straight, smooth road and controlling the car with one practised hand, turned to face his friend who was on the rear seat. "You're thinking of Sylvia. No"— at a gesture of Hood's—"I'm not forgetting old Red-top. You mustn't mind him. He can be trusted to understand, and say nothing. But you're all wrong, Louis, if you think your friends won't stand by you—especially Sylvia Farquhar. She's a girl in a thousand——"

Hood held up his hand.

"I can't talk about it now, Harry. Please! You're a brick, old chap, and I'm awfully grateful, but I must go alone for the present. I must have time to think."

"Do you mean that you aren't going to have any professional help?" asked Harrison with a glance aside at Peter, who sat beside him, lost in thought. "You ought——"

Clancy roused himself and with a sudden movement twisted round on the seat, leaned both arms on the cushioned back, and faced Louis Hood squarely.

"Mr. Hood," he said, gravely, "you may know, and Harry will tell you, that I've had some little experience in unravelling affairs of this kind. If you will accept my services, such as they are——"

"Bravo, old Red-top!" shouted Harry, exultantly. "I knew you wouldn't stay out of it! Good old scout! I say, Louis, he'll fix you right as rain in no time."

Unheeding his old schoolfellow's enthusiasm, Clancy's attention did not shift from the dark, pale, shadowed face of Louis Hood. He saw doubt and serious trouble, even a touch of fear, perhaps, in the deep-set eyes.

"I have found out a good deal already, Mr. Hood," he said, his gravity still more apparent. "Hadn't you better let me try to find out the rest?"

They had reached Fern Hills. The car sped swiftly through the village and began to ascend the hill toward the heights on which lay the great estates of its wealthy and envied inhabitants. Still Louis Hood remained silent.

"I don't want to force my services upon you," said Peter at last, "but it's a strange and complicated case, and in the interests of science, my own peculiar science——"

The car turned into the long, shadowy, winding drive of the Hood place and drew up slowly at the east end of the fatal terrace. Louis Hood looked up at the gray walls which had sheltered him and his for many happy years, but which now seemed grim and austere in the slanting rays of the westering sun. A slight shiver shook his whole frame. He gazed earnestly into Peter's keen blue eyes, and then suddenly the extreme gravity of his face lightened by a perceptible shade.

"I'll put the case unreservedly into your hands, Mr. Clancy," he said, decisively. "There isn't any one that I'd trust it to with more confidence." He lifted his head, folded his arms, and added, crisply: "Go to it!"

CHAPTER XI

Who Was Walter Brown?

THE shrouded empty rooms were very still. The footsteps of the two men echoed on the bare parquetry of the hall as Louis Hood led Clancy through it to a large library which was situated on the right at the back of the main house. Some effort had been made to render this room more habitable. The covers had been removed from the furniture and pictures, and a fire was laid ready on the broad hearth.

The two men were alone, Carlisle having taken himself off at once as soon as he was satisfied that Louis's affairs were in the best of hands. Any intrusion in his friend's difficulties was farthest from his chivalrous mind, but he said "good-bye" a little wistfully, nevertheless, for his interest and natural curiosity were strained almost to the breaking point. It was, however, with a comparatively light heart that he left them, so convinced was he of Peter Clancy's unerring skill.

"May I offer you anything, Mr. Clancy?"

Louis Hood had lighted the fire and now turned from it to attend, with instinctive hospitality, to other possible wants of this unexpected guest.

"No, thank you," said Peter, quickly. "I'll smoke if I may. And now let's get down to business, Mr. Hood." He spoke rapidly, but with an innate courtesy which robbed his words of any hint of brusqueness.

"First of all," he went on, "I want to know all you can tell me about Walter Brown. His real name——" Hood looked up swiftly, and Peter held up his hand with an arresting gesture. "I'm perfectly sure Walter Brown wasn't the man's real name, Mr. Hood. It's no use to deny it. I thought for a little while this morning that I might have been mistaken in believing that 'Walter Brown' was an alias, but now I'm convinced that it was. If I'm to be of any service to the cause of justice"—(he spoke earnestly and Louis Hood failed to note that he did not say "of service to you" but "to the cause of justice")—"you must be perfectly frank with me. I assure you that I am discreet, and it is absolutely necessary that I should know who Walter Brown was—what connection you had with him—why you didn't want any one to know who he really was—why you gave him a check for so large an amount——" Peter paused an instant and added, a trifle sternly—"And why you were trying to take that check from the body when I stopped you."

Hood's tall figure straightened suddenly. He had remained standing in front of the fire warming his long, slender, supple hands. Now he clenched them

tightly, looked earnestly at Peter for a long moment, and then began walking back and forth across the room. There was a lithe strength in the man, a feeling of tremendous forces held relentlessly in leash which gave a curious effect of incongruity to his quiet voice.

"So—you knew," he said, slowly. "Well, Mr. Clancy, I'll tell you what I can. For the present I am going to ask you to allow me to withhold my poor friend's name. I cannot see that the knowledge of that could be of the slightest service to you. If you feel that it is absolutely necessary at any future time, and can convince me of it, I'll engage to tell you. It's sufficient now, I think, that you should know that—we'll call him Walter Brown—was the brother of a very dear friend of mine. Walter and I were pals when we were boys, and saw a great deal of each other. He was a favourite with my mother, and visited us here the first summer after we bought this place. The Carlisles were abroad that year, so that Harrison did not recognize him, perhaps had never seen him at all—I don't know."

He paced the length of the room and back before he spoke again. His words were so deliberate as to suggest to Peter's mind the possibility that the story he was telling might not be perfectly true; that he might be making it up as he went along, or suppressing facts, perhaps. He did not know Louis Hood intimately, and so far had been prepossessed in his

favour, but Clancy was too wary to be immediately convinced by appearances. He merely made a mental note of this possibility and awaited developments.

"Walter was a jolly, adventurous sort of kid," Hood went on, still pacing restlessly back and forth, "but he grew wilder as he grew older, and after he came of age and received his inheritance he began to go the pace pretty thoroughly. He ran through most of his money, though it was a large fortune, in an astonishingly short time and then suddenly he disappeared. I heard from him several times afterward, from California, from Hawaii, from Japan. . . . I think he stayed in Japan for some little time, but he got into some kind of a scrape with the natives, I don't know exactly what. I only know he left suddenly and came back to the Pacific coast."

Again Hood paused, though Peter didn't interrupt him by so much as a word. In a moment he resumed:

"It was in San Francisco that he got into serious trouble. I don't know the details—some shooting affair—and the man died. Walter was tried, under the assumed name of Brown, and was sentenced to ten years. . . . He wrote a despairing letter to me and asked me to keep it from his—his family. I did so and his—I mean the family came to believe that he was dead. . . . The poor fellow's sentence was commuted for good conduct and he was

released last week. He came straight to me for help—came here, not knowing that I was not living here at present. Fortunately—or unfortunately"—he corrected himself bitterly—"I was coming here last night, and proposed that he should wait for me. . . . You heard me tell the police inspector what happened after he came, so I needn't go over that again, unless——"

"No," said Peter, quietly, "I remember all that you told Winkle last night—about the attempted suicide in the housekeeper's room and your thinking that a reason for believing that he did finally kill himself. That's all clear. And I understand, if the man had been in the pen and his family weren't wise to the fact, that you'd do a lot to keep them from learning who he was, especially if you were very close friends. But why did you try to get your check back? It was a crazy thing to do with three men standing so near."

Hood pushed his long fingers through his thick dark hair.

"I suppose it was insane," he said, wearily, "but it was all so sudden and I could only think—I only felt how necessary it was, for—for the sake of his family—that no one should guess who he was, and for an instant I had a wild idea of denying that I knew anything about him. It wasn't feasible, and I'm glad, now, that you stopped me, Mr. Clancy. But I still intend to conceal his identity if it's a possible

thing." He lifted his head and spoke with a sudden fervour.

"I sincerely hope it will be possible, Mr. Hood," said Peter, "for your sake and for the sake of all your friends." After a moment he added: "The suggestion at the inquest that it might have been a case of blackmail took you quite by surprise then?"

"No," Hood hesitated, "I can't quite say that it did. Something in the inspector's manner last night brought the possibility to my notice."

"Well," said Peter after a slightly longer pause, "let's leave that for the present. I'd like you to tell me——" He broke off suddenly and started from his chair. "There's someone moving in the bushes down there," he said, softly, pointing through the window. "Just stand a little this way, out of sight, and see if you can tell who it is. He'll come out into the open in a minute. There! Did you get him? Right beyond the trunk of that big tree."

"It's no one I know," said Hood in a low, tense voice, "why should——"

"Inspector Winkle on the job," said Peter, tersely. "That man sneaking up through the bushes is what we call a fly-cop, a police detective. It sticks out all over him. Winkle's going to earn his pay, and get lots of glory, is he? Well, well, we'll see. Don't let it annoy you if you can help it, Mr. Hood. It's part of his game. He'll play it in his way, and I'll play it in mine, and we'll see who goes to the mat

first. Only I don't like the idea of any one getting wise to my being in it just now." In his excitement Peter relapsed into the vernacular which he had studied long, and with varying success, to conquer. "Just pull down the shades, if you don't mind. I don't want to be seen here for the present."

Hood complied at once. When he came back from the windows his face showed set and angry in the light which Clancy, with his usual quickness, had switched on.

"Go on, ask me any questions you like, Mr. Clancy," said Hood, flinging himself into a chair. "You were about to say——"

"I was going to ask you," Peter went on as if there had been no interruption, "to tell me exactly what you did after you parted with Brown. I think you said you didn't go to the door with him."

"No. He knew the house well, and I was in a hurry. I had lost track of the time and didn't realize till then how late it was."

"That was about seven, wasn't it?" said Peter. "And Harry didn't expect you till nearly eight. At least he didn't give you up till then."

"That's true," rejoined Hood with no apparent annoyance. "But I realized all I had to do in that time. I knew where my tackle was, but my heavy fishing things, woollen stockings and so forth, had all been packed away before my mother—before my mother died, and I didn't know, except in a general

way, where they were. You know how helpless a man is at finding things, and I'm afraid I'm worse than the rest for I ransacked a lot of trunks before I found what I needed, and was only just ready when you came."

"Certainly," said Peter, with the air of being entirely satisfied with the explanation. "I remember very well. You didn't even have on your outside coat. . . . Now I want to get this perfectly clear. Suppose you show me exactly where you stood when Brown left, and where you went, and all the rest. I just want to make sure how much noise there might have been out on the terrace without your having heard it."

"You think there was a noise, then?" Hood paused on the way to the hall to ask the question.

"May have been. May not have been," said Peter, succinctly. "If it was a jiu jitsu trick. . . . Did it occur to you that it might have been, Mr. Hood?" Peter's glance was as sharp as a sword, but it was withdrawn so swiftly that Louis Hood did not perceive it. "Harry's man Hoki is an expert at jiu jitsu, I understand. It put it into my mind. You know the trick, the chap who pulls it gets the edge of his forearm against the other fellow's neck with a clinch that can't be broken. Then he presses and presses—till the victim's neck snaps. The wound in Brown's throat might have been simply a blind. Pretty ugly business. Probably no one but

a native Jap could do it. Brown had some trouble in Japan, I think you said. If it was serious——"

"But nobody knew he was here," said Hood, quickly. "He had told no one that he was coming. I don't fancy any one followed him all the way from the prison in California."

"No," said Peter, thoughtfully, "I don't fancy any one did." And then more slowly: "No one knew he was here, and yet someone murdered him and left no footprints in the snow. . . . Well, all facts 'll fit when we get the right start, you can bet on that. Now let's see. You were standing about here?"

They had passed into the rear end of the main hall, and Peter stepped over to the baize-covered door which shut off the servants' wing.

"Yes," said Hood. "Just there. Walter seemed quite cheered up when he left me, and he looked back and smiled at me as he opened the door. As soon as he closed it I switched off the lights from this button here," he indicated a switch plate beside the door, "and went up to the store-room by the back stairs. If you'll follow me, I'll show you."

He led the way through the short passage, which they had traversed on the previous night, and up some stairs which started by the door of the housekeeper's room. They went down a long hall on the second floor and up another flight of stairs, and at length found themselves in a big trunk room at the extreme end of the house.

"Well, there sure could have been one devil of a row out in front without your having heard anything from here," said Peter, swiftly noting the disorder of the room. Several trunks stood open, and their contents had been tossed about in a manner plainly indicating that they had been hurriedly searched through by their owner. No servant would have dared to leave them in that condition, Peter decided. He expressed himself quite satisfied by what he had seen and they returned at once to the library.

The fire had died down to glowing embers, and Hood shivered as he rang for more wood.

The bell was answered at once by an elderly man in the semi-dress livery of a servant whose duties were still in a transitional state. He wore dark trousers and a striped waistcoat, but the black tail-coat of the conventional butler was replaced by a loose alpaca house coat.

"Will you bring in some more wood, John?" said Louis Hood in a kindly voice. "The house seems very chilly," and he shivered again, stooping low over the embers.

"Yes, sir," said the man, promptly, glancing aside at Peter with a quick look of inquiry. Evidently, he had supposed his master to be alone.

Peter's eye took in swiftly the peculiarities of the man's appearance, his short stature, loose-jointed limbs, the long gorilla-like arms hanging well forward, the bald head rimmed with smooth gray hair, carried

low on the slightly stooping shoulders; the heavy face with its long upper lip and chin like a spade, its short jutting nose and its little, quick eyes, which, somehow, gave an expression of unrest to an otherwise stolid countenance.

The minute Peter laid eyes on him he received a strong though undefined impression that there was something wrong with the man, but he forebore to question him until he returned from the back of the house with his arms full of wood.

As the man stooped over to replenish the fire, Peter remarked in a friendly, conversational tone, "Pretty cold weather we're having for this time of the year, isn't it? You must have had a hard winter out here in the country?"

The servant acquiesced politely as he laid the sticks upon the dying embers.

"You must have been glad of a holiday yesterday," Peter went on. "Your daughter's acting in the 'Wishing Stile' they tell me. That's quite a show, I'll tell the world. I saw it last week. Was that the first time you'd seen it?"

If John thought that this stranger's interest in him was unusual, he made no sign.

"Yes, sor. It was," he answered, in the restrained manner of a well-trained servant.

Clancy's intention of drawing the old man out was plain to Louis Hood, though the reason for it was not quite so obvious.

Peter continued:

"I suppose your daughter sent you passes." He merely made the remark with no ulterior purpose, and was surprised at the puzzled look which crossed the old man's face.

"Why, no, sor," he said, slowly placing the last stick on the fire. "It's a funny thing, but I don't know who sent the tickets. They come by registered mail first thing yesterday morning. Just the tickets by themselves in an envelope an' no worrud of writing. Eliza and me, we supposed of course Phœbe'd sent 'em, but she didn't. We saw her before the show, and afterward. She was all excited because she had to play Miss Vaughn's part in the first of the piece. Miss Vaughn is understudy I think they call it, for Miss Viola Gale, her that plays the principal part, and Miss Gale wasn't well enough to come to the theatre for the first act. Phœbe told us, but I don't think the audience knew the difference, Miss Vaughn done so well. My girl done well in Miss Vaughn's part, too, if I do say it, an' I wish she could play it all the time——" He paused abruptly, realizing suddenly that he was overstepping the bounds of decorum. "I beg your pardon, sor," he addressed himself to Louis Hood. "I——"

"It's all right," Peter put in, quickly. "I'm interested in your daughter. She must be clever to play Miss Vaughn's part. And you say she didn't send you the tickets?" He harked back to the one

point in the old man's conversation which really did interest him. Someone, it was plain, someone sent the caretakers tickets for the play which would be sure to interest them more than any other. They were almost certain not to miss the opportunity thus afforded to see their daughter act. "Who would know?" Peter thought, his eyes fixed meditatively on the master of the house. And immediately the telephone conversation of the night before jumped into his head. He could almost hear Hood's voice saying, "I sent you the tickets yesterday. For the 'Wishing Stile'. Yes."

And the lady to whom he was talking had evidently not received them. Could that mean? . . .

Peter brought his mind back to the present with a jerk. Louis Hood was speaking.

"That's queer, John," he was saying, with a look of interest but no apparent discomposure. "I understood you to say, over the 'phone, that Phœbe'd sent them. If she didn't, then who do you think did?"

"I couldn't imagine, sor, unless you—as a surprise like for Eliza and me—unless you moight have sint 'em, sor?"

The upward inflection made it a definite question. Peter, every sense on the alert, waited for the reply. It came at once.

"Why, no, John," Hood said, readily. "It never even occurred to me. It was very thoughtful of someone."

"Very," said Clancy, with so much emphasis as to cause Louis Hood to glance at him sharply. For a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes—a long, steady look. Then Peter glanced back to the old servant.

"Well, you had a good time in town, I suppose," he said, "but it was too bad you couldn't have been here, too, John. You missed a lot of excitement."

The old man, who had been blowing up the fire with a quaint, antique bellows, straightened suddenly and shot a swift glance in Peter's direction.

"It's the kind of excitement I can be doin' without, sor," he said. Turning again to the fire and bending down over it so that his face was concealed, he muttered, "Trouble, black trouble comin' to the house—— An' I was warned, too, but I failed to heed." . . .

"What do you mean—you were 'warned'?" broke in Peter, quickly. "How warned, John? Did you see——"

"I didn't see nothin', sor," replied the man, uneasily, still busy over the fire.

"John fancies he heard something night before last," said Hood, glancing from the servant's stooping figure to Clancy and back again. "He imagines he has a special family connection with the unseen."

"It's no subject for jest, Mr. Hood," said the man in an awed voice, turning to face his master. "Me

father heard it the night before he was killed on the railroad, and me mother heard it, wailin' round the house the very night me brother Jim died 'way off in Australia. The twenty-second of March it was, and the twenty-second of March was the night Jim died. Ye that don't know can laugh and joke about it, but if ye've once heard that banshee wail——"

"And you heard it night before last, John?" Peter questioned, eagerly. "Tell me about it, will you? I'm Irish, too, you see, and I'm not as skeptical as most. What did it sound like? A woman's voice?"

The eyes which the old man turned to Peter wore a haunted expression.

"Yes," he said, fearfully. "High an' shrill like a woman's, but not like any woman's on this earth. It rose and fell on the wind, long drawn out, till you'd think no breath could last, an' then low and moanin'. God, sors, 'twas a fearsome sound." With trembling hand he wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "Eliza heard it, too," he went on. "Ye can ask her. An' I says to her then, 'trouble, black trouble will come to this house, Eliza, you mark my words'." He paused a moment and then added, fatefully, "An' the trouble come, just as I said."

"It was only the wind in the trees, John." Hood spoke calmly though no one could have heard the awesome tones of the old voice without a slight

sensation, as of a cold finger along the spine. "There was a high wind night before last, and——"

"There's been high winds many nights sence I been in this house," persisted the old man, "but niver such a wan as that. The wind had a voice that night, a voice, though it said no worruds, or none that I could make out."

"Did it sound all around the house?" asked Peter, eagerly.

"Yes, all round, as ye might say, sor. But stronger out there," he pointed toward the front of the house. "Eliza thought it was in the front rooms, and we come as far as the big hall an' listened. But the house was all as quiet as death. The wailin' still wint on, but 'twas outside beyond the terrace, just where——" He stopped and spread his great bony hand over his mouth. His body seemed to shrink inside his clothes, and his eyes were wild.

"Did it sound near the terrace or far away?" asked Peter. "And could you be sure it wasn't a human voice? Someone down on the road, perhaps, in trouble?"

Hood, who had no clue to what was in Clancy's mind, thought the question an odd one.

"It was near the terrace," asserted the old servant, definitely, "an' no human voice could make that sound. There'd not be breath enough in any human lungs to carry a wail like that for minutes together. It kep' up all night, too. I couldn't sleep fer the

sound of it. Whiles it was loud, and whiles it was low, but there it was all through the dark. 'Twas not till the wind died, toward dawn, that it died, too, and I fell asleep."

"It lasted all night," repeated Peter, softly, as if communing with his own thoughts, "and it died with the wind. It——" Suddenly he stopped. He caught his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and gazed into the fire with eyes that saw nothing—eyes that saw nothing but the glimmering ghost of an idea, startling in its bizarre improbability, and yet——

With a swift movement he was on his feet.

"I'll be back in a minute; stay where you are, if you please, Mr. Hood," he cried, and dashed out of the room, down the wide hall, and the front door closed upon him swiftly and noiselessly.

"Well, what's the meaning of that?" said Louis Hood, blankly. "Has the man taken leave of his senses?"

"Looks like it, sor," said John in amazement. "He was sittin' here quietly an'"—he shook his bald head, as if the stranger's actions were too much for him, and at a nod of dismissal from the master left the room muttering to himself.

Hood paced restlessly back and forth across the room. So unaccountable did Clancy's actions seem to him that he was about to disregard the injunction to stay where he was and had already crossed to the

hall door, when Peter returned, out of breath, but with a light in his eyes which it was beyond his powers to conceal.

When he spoke, it was in a tone which Louis Hood had never heard him use before. The words came crisply, and with decision: "I'm going into town at once, Mr. Hood," he said. "I haven't a minute to lose and I can't stop to explain. Will you please 'phone Harry to bring his car over? You haven't a car here? No. I thought not. Ask him to drive over and meet me on the road to Lounsberry in ten minutes—— Yes, yes I know"— as Hood tried to put in a word—"Fern Hills is nearer, but I happen to know there's a train on the branch line that will be quicker for me. Tell him to pick me up at the end of the short cut where we were fishing this morning. He'll understand. If I'm not at the junction of the roads tell him to drive on, hell bent for election. I'll be ahead of him, understand? Got it straight? Don't make any mistake. There's no time to be lost. At the junction of the roads where we were this morning, or he's to follow on through on the straight road to Lounsberry."

And without waiting for a reply from his astonished client, Peter darted from the house.

CHAPTER XII

"The Lady with the Funny Veil"

"WHAT in hell is up, old Red-top?" cried Harrison Carlisle, as his swiftly moving car slowed down alongside the only less swiftly moving figure of Peter Clancy on the Lounsberry road.

"Don't stop," cried Peter, breathlessly, jumping to the running board. "Drive on as if the devil was chasing you. I've got to catch the 6:59 train, and it's due in just about one minute. Step on the gas, man, and let's see what she can do. Gee!" as the car leaped forward, "that's something like! Knew I could depend on you, Harry. Let her out! Let her out! There's the whistle now! Good boy! We'll make it yet. I told you so! So long, old man! See you to-morrow. . . ."

The rest of the sentence was lost as Clancy leaped from the car and, dashing across the station platform, swung himself on the steps of the train which was already in motion. He paused outside the door and waved a good-bye to his mystified friend. Then, as the train swept around a curve, he entered the coach, and still breathing heavily from haste and excitement, sat down in the rear seat.

There were not many passengers, and although he could not be sure, since the train was already in when he reached the little station, Peter thought that no one had boarded it at Lounsberry.

Presently the conductor came through, looking to right and left, and clicking his ticket-punch.

"Tickets. Tickets, please," he said, monotonously, and came on without pause.

"No one on this coach got on here, anyway," thought Peter. "To New York," he added, aloud, meeting the conductor's eye. "How much?"

The conductor stated the amount of the fare, and punching a folded slip in several places, deftly slit it down the fold, and prying up the velvet binding on the back of the seat in front slipped one half under the edge. He was about to turn away when Peter touched his arm.

"I'd like to have a word with you when you're at liberty," Peter said, quietly. "It's pretty important. Could you——"

"I'll come back as soon as I go through the next car," said the conductor, with a friendly nod. Peter's open, freckled face and pleasant smile rarely failed in making the sort of appeal he desired, and the conductor, whose life was a very monotonous one, welcomed the opportunity of a chat with so prepossessing a young man.

He returned in a moment and seated himself on the arm of Peter's seat.

"Well, what is it?" he asked in a hoarse but good-humoured voice. "What can I do for you, young man?"

"Sit in here," said Peter, motioning to the place beside him. "I've quite a lot of questions I want to ask you, and you'll be more comfortable."

The conductor slid down on to the seat and regarded Peter curiously.

"All right, boy. Fire ahead. It's fifteen minutes to the next station stop and——"

"Is this your regular run?" Peter interrupted, eagerly. "And were you on this train last night?"

"I sure was," answered the conductor, leaning sidewise to catch the low tones of Peter's voice.

"Did you notice any one that got on at Lounsberry last night? A lady, alone, and well-dressed?" Peter was guessing. He had little to guide him in the last description save for the fact that the mysterious woman of old Bill Brown's story, the woman whom he now, for his own reasons, so ardently sought, had undoubtedly worn shoes of elegant and sophisticated cut. That his guess was near the mark was immediately shown by the expression of the conductor's face.

"You mean the lady in the funny veil?" he asked with interest.

Peter nodded. What sort of veil a "funny veil" was, he was to learn later.

"That's the one," he said, quickly. "Can you

describe her? Tell me all about her. I have reason to believe it's someone I'm looking for. Tell me just how she looked, how she was dressed, and everything you can remember."

"I didn't see her get on," said the conductor, thoughtfully. "I was up forward and I was looking at a swell automobile that drove away from the station just as we run in. Aren't many swells come over this way and I was wondering——"

"Did you see the car plainly?" asked Peter, impetuously. "Or the person who drove it? Was there more than one——"

"Now listen, kid. The lights are dim to that station, and you can see for yourself it was dark this time last night. Besides, the car was gone before you could say 'Jack Robinson'. I just made out that it was a big, long, handsome-looking car with a coupé or sedan body or something like that—and that was all."

Peter with difficulty hid his disappointment. The driver of that mysterious car interested him more than anything else in the world at that moment; but the lady, the proverbial "woman in the case," was of scarcely less consequence as he saw it at that time. His hunch that old Bill Brown's story would prove of importance amounted now to almost a certainty. What relation these two unknown people bore to Louis Hood—what part each had played in the plot which had resulted in the tragic death

of "Walter Brown"—he had yet to learn, but he swore to himself by all that he held most sacred that he would learn it before many days were over.

To this end he would thread the intricate maze cautiously, warily. Just now there was only one dim figure in evidence in the twisted vista, a woman's figure, dark, enigmatical. To shed more light upon its unexpected presence was the purpose before him now which sent him whirling through the night; besides perhaps the one person available who could give him information.

"All right," said Peter, quickly, in response to the conductor's last statement. "Let's forget the car. Now tell me about the lady."

The conductor tilted back his hard blue cap to scratch his head.

"Well, now, you're asking something," he said, slowly. "I ain't much of a hand at noticing ladies as a general rule, and this one—well, I think she was what you might call a peach, far's one could see—— But there wasn't much to see but her eyes and her hair. They was sure all to the good. She had to pay her fare in, like you did, on account of the station being closed, and I had a good look at her. Her hair was something *to* look at, shiny gold and curling all out from under a little cute-looking hat, and her eyes were blue—oh, bluer than any I ever seen—as blue as the blue signal lights at the switches. She looked 'em up at me when she asked how much the fare was

to New York and for a minute I was so kinda dazzled by 'em, old as I am, that I couldn't remember whether it was sixty cents or a hundred dollars," and the conductor laughed heartily at his own susceptibility.

"But what was the rest of her face like? And how was she dressed?" asked Peter, making mental note of the two items already furnished.

"I can't tell you about the rest of her face," answered the conductor, readily, "on account of the veil she had on her. I never seen one like it before. It was quite thick and was strung across from under her little hat so it just left her eyes out. It came right across here," he drew a line with his thick forefinger from the top of one ear along his cheek bones and across the bridge of his prominent nose to the top of the other ear. "It was some queer-looking contraption, but sorta cute, too."

Peter nodded.

"I know the kind of veil you mean," he said, quickly. "You see 'em on the Avenue quite a lot these days, especially in motor cars. It's a fad a certain type of woman affects to make her look as if she came out of a harem. So she was wearing that sort of veil, was she? Hm—— Yes. Well, how else was she dressed? Plain or fancy? Light clothes or dark?"

"Dark and plain, I think," answered the conductor, somewhat uncertainly. "But Lord, how do I know?

I ain't much up on women's clothes and I hardly noticed—— Say," as if struck by a sudden thought, "maybe Frank could tell you more."

"Frank?"

"Yes, Frank Carey, the brakeman. He's young and likes the girls a whole lot and he usually sits in the rear car. That was where she was last night. He's there now, if——"

Peter was on his feet in an instant.

"Come on," he said, eagerly, "Lead me to him."

Frank Carey proved to be a good-looking young American boy with a cheerful bronzed face not meticulously clean and a pair of wide-awake gray eyes. They found him at the very end of the train, lounging in the seat which runs lengthwise of the car, surrounded by several lanterns and signal flags, reading absorbedly from a highly coloured magazine.

He looked up rather disgustedly when the conductor spoke his name, and kept his place in the magazine with a grimy forefinger, but he was on the alert in an instant when the object of Peter's quest was explained to him.

"Did I see her?" he cried. "Have I got eyes in my head? Good lord! I should say I did see her! Whew! I took notice of her when she hopped on the back platform at Lounsberry. Like a bird she was—so light and quick. 'Beg pardon,' she says. 'I can get in this way?' 'Sure,' I says, nearly dropping me lantern. 'Surest thing you know!' And I opened

the door for her myself. Gee! She was a hummer to look at even before she took off that crazy veil thing that covered most of her face."

"She did take it off, then?" asked Peter, impetuously.

"Gosh, yes!" exclaimed the brakeman, his eyes dancing at the recollection. "It was awful hot in the train last night and she hadn't been sitting in that seat over there," he indicated the rear seat on the opposite side of the car, "for very long before that wuzzy stuff she had all over her nose and mouth was more'n she could stand. She looked down the car a couple of times, and then she ups and fiddles around the edge of her hat and off comes the veil and, gee!" Words failed him.

"Tell me! What was she like?" cried Peter, excitedly.

"Oh, boy! What was she like? Like herself and nobody else in God's world! Her pictures ain't in it with——"

"Her pictures!" Peter caught the young brakeman roughly by the arm and shook it in his excitement. "Then it's someone who's well known—who has her pictures in the paper? Speak up, man! Who——"

Frank Carey was delighted with the sensation he was making. He grinned at Peter with one eye half closed. Then slowly he ruffled the pages of the lurid magazine he had been holding all the while in

his hand. He ran part way through them, turned back, and with moistened finger separated the pages one by one. At last he rolled back the front part of the magazine, and handed it to Peter with the right page exposed to view.

Peter gasped.

Looking up at him was one of the best-known faces on the "Great White Way". A face which had burst upon the New York public with all the suddenness and glory of a meteor. A face of such transcendent beauty that, once seen, it could never be forgotten. Peter did not need to read the lines under the portrait, but he read them mechanically, nevertheless.

Miss Viola Gale, who has captivated all eyes and ears and hearts as "Magnolia Grandiflora" in the "Wishing Stile."

Peter stood as one dazed. Like a floating thread of gossamer there was wafted back into his mind the words of old John, the caretaker at the house of Louis Hood, "Miss Gale wasn't well enough to come to the theatre for the first act." There was something, too, about the understudy playing so well that the audience was unaware of the change. But John knew because his daughter was in the cast. Strange. . . .

"Are you sure," asked Peter, imperatively, glancing up at the brakeman, "are you perfectly certain that it was Viola Gale?"

"D'you think there are two girls in this sufferin'

world with faces like that?" the boy counter-questioned, hotly. "I set here lookin' at her all the way in to Newark, and you can bet your sweet life I ain't made any mistake. Besides, I'd just got this here very magazine off the news boy and was looking at the pictures, and there she was. I set here and studied them both and they were as much alike as two peas or more so. No, sir, you can't fool me. It was Viola Gale and don't let that worry you none."

"Why'n't you tell me, and let me have a peek at her, Frank?" The conductor's voice was full of disappointment.

"Oh, you was talkin' to an old lady in one of the forward coaches all the way in to Hoboken last night, you remember, Bert, and I didn't like to ask you to come back and risk an eye on a nactress. Didn't know how t'would set. Besides, she put her veil back on as we pulled into Newark, and there wasn't so much to see then. Oh, gosh, we're almost there now. Excuse me. See you later." And the brakeman and conductor went hurriedly off to their respective duties.

Peter had much to think of during the remainder of the short journey. He thanked his friendly informants, and bade them a cheerful though rather absent-minded "good-night" as he left the train in Hoboken. All the way through the tube he was plunged in thought, planning, weighing, and considering the unexpected information he had been so

fortunate as to secure. That there could be any mistake as to the identity of the strange woman seemed improbable. In his own mind he quite agreed with Frank Carey, there could not be two faces in the world like that of Viola Gale. But what had induced her to become an accomplice in so hideous a crime?

Peter knew little of her save that she was from the West and had only appeared in New York this present season. She had made an immediate and brilliant success of the musical comedy in which she was starring. A pleasing voice, added to a face and figure of phenomenal attraction, had taken beauty-worshipping Broadway by storm. In one short season she had won her way to ephemeral fame, and there was a rumour that she was rehearsing a most expensive and spectacular motion-picture production which would be the hit of the coming year in that popular form of entertainment.

So far as Peter could judge she had fame and wealth before her. Why, then, should she risk it all? It was a question to be approached warily, by every subtle art at his command. Either the plot had been so well laid that she had no fear of detection (else why run the risk of removing her veil in the train) or—what?

Peter racked his brain for a possible solution. Had it been of transcendent importance to her that "Walter Brown" should be put out of the way? And, if

so, how had she known where he would be on that fatal night? Had Louis Hood sent her word? But he hadn't known himself—— Stay. There was only Hood's word for that.

"Go slow, old top, go slow," muttered Peter to himself, "don't let your reel over-run. Play your fish before you try to land him—or her, as the case may be. Gad, I wish I had a photograph of Walter Brown to confront her with. I must look up Inspector Winkle in the morning and see. . . . In the meantime, I'll just look the ground over—nothing more. I'll take no chances, you can bet your life."

Communing thus with himself, Peter ran up the long stairs at Thirty-third Street. The "Great White Way" glittered and flashed before him as he bent his steps northward. Newsboys were crying the late edition of the papers, and Peter paused to buy several, casting a hurried eye over each in turn. The news of the sensational revelations at the inquest in Morrisville had reached the papers in time to be set forth in staring headlines across the front pages. Louis Hood's prominence in both social and political circles made the tragic event of the preceding night a matter of public interest, and the accounts, especially in the papers whose political interests were opposed to his, fairly bristling with innuendo, were scarcely short of libellous. Peter remembered gratefully that the paper habitually read in the Carlisle home was old-fashioned and conservative, and he

noted the gist of the restrained article in that journal with a feeling of relief. There was little there to alarm his friends on behalf of Louis Hood. The thought of them, and of the virulent attacks in a number of the papers, stirred him to fresh endeavour.

He threw all the papers, except the *Planet*, which had the biggest headlines of all, into a rubbish can at the corner (for, like Kipling's Elephant's Child, Peter was very tidy) and proceeded swiftly up Broadway. He turned westward on a cross street where, in front of a brightly lighted theatre, "The Wishing Stile" wrote itself in huge, blinding-white electric light, word by word across the blue-black sky.

The play had been on some time when Peter made his way into the back of the darkened house. The stage shone like a jewel, brilliant with light and colour. Soft music played seductively, and a silly pair of lovers (or so they seemed to Peter's troubled mind) sang a passionate love song to each other, via the appreciative audience. Peter waited anxiously for Miss Gale to make her appearance. He had seen her before, when her soul was probably free of crime. He wished to see her again, to note whether the events of last night had cast any shadow upon her lovely, alluring face.

She came at last. There was a pause in the action, a sense of suspense. The stage was empty, and she came in alone, so graceful and delicate, so full

of laughter and the gaiety of life, so astoundingly beautiful, that the audience burst again into the applause which greeted her every entrance.

She acknowledged it with a little quirking glance and a laughing nod, danced to the centre of the stage, and began to sing.

Her voice was not at all extraordinary, but it had a happy, care-free ring which carried the jaded audience along with her, and at the end the applause was as eager and enthusiastic as even a gifted prima donna could wish.

Peter had hurriedly secured a pair of opera glasses on his entrance, and for the remainder of the act he gazed at her through them with an amazed and grudging admiration. If this woman, or girl, as she seemed, had a heavy guilt upon her soul, thought Peter, she was a most marvellous actress, or else she was callous beyond words to express. Not a flutter of the long eyelashes betrayed her. There was not a hint of guile or guilt in her merry, happy face.

Her apparently light-hearted enjoyment of a world in which everything had been ordered to her liking was most infectious, and at the close of the act the curtain calls were many and extravagantly prolonged.

Peter shook his head as he watched her. It was up to him to be careful in his dealings with this woman, he considered, and as soon as the lights flashed up all over the house, and the audience began to stir, he sought an usher and passing him a small card and a

large coin whispered a few words in his ear, upon which the usher, after a glance at the card, disappeared with satisfying alacrity.

The card had been in Peter's hand for some time. He had carefully selected it from a number, in the light of the lobby, and had smiled a little to himself as he looked at it.

"Mr. James Flynn" it read and below in smaller letters "The New York *Meteor*."

A number of scoops had been provided by Mr. James Flynn, otherwise Mr. Peter Clancy, to the regular reporters on the staff of the *Meteor*, and the little oblong of pasteboard was the only tribute he had exacted. It had proved of service to him before and was likely to prove so again.

"Miss Gale will see you in her dressing room as soon as she's had time to change, sir," whispered the usher, breathless from the haste he had made. "She'll be ready in about ten minutes, and she doesn't go on again in the first part of the act. There's quite a long wait between this and the next, so you'll have some little time. This way, sir."

Peter followed the usher behind the scenes, where the elaborate change of setting was going forward, in almost monastic silence, which contrasted strangely with the stir and hum of voices beyond the curtain.

It was some moments before they could find space in the crowded elevator which finally shot them up to the dressing rooms, and when they had passed

along a narrow hall, redolent with the smell of grease paint and perfumed powder, a broad gleam of light from the open door of the star's dressing room indicated that Miss Gale no longer desired strict privacy.

His accommodating conductor having indicated this open door, Peter slipped another coin into his welcoming palm and, dismissing him, went quietly forward, alone.

The hall was comparatively dark, but the dressing room of Miss Viola Gale was filled with a dazzling brightness in which, apparently, no shadow lurked. Peter paused an instant in the doorway and surveyed the little scene before him. His feet had made almost no noise on the stone floor of the passage, and the woman within was, or so it seemed, unaware of his presence.

She was seated on a low stool before a long dressing table. At her feet knelt the dresser, a lean black woman, busy with the fastenings of a pair of high-heeled gold slippers. The slender figure of the actress was apparently sheathed in molten gold. A wave of the precious metal lay low across her breast, flowed beneath her supple arms, and the two sides melted together at the waist, leaving the white neck and shoulders bare. How the costume could have been kept in its appointed place, unless it was pasted on like wall paper, was one part of the mystery which Peter never did unravel. He gave the dazzling figure, however, but a passing glance. His whole

attention was riveted on the face in the triptych mirror of the dressing table.

Seen at close quarters it was more than ever charmingly beautiful. The features were almost too perfect, the colouring, even allowing for the stage make-up, was enough to take one's breath. The masses of waving hair rivalled the gold of her gown (if gown it could be called) and as Peter looked, she slowly raised her eyes. Blue eyes they were, blue as the gentian flower, and as they met his in the glass the pupils dilated suddenly, and the colour deepened to violet, but there was no trace of trouble or fear in their steady gaze. What need was there for fear? What beautiful, successful actress needs to fear the eyes of an admiring, pleasant, red-headed reporter from the New York *Meteor?*

Those of Viola Gale dropped for a second to a card lying on the dressing table and with a smile she turned toward the door.

"Come in, Mr. Flynn," she laughed. "My war paint's all on and I'm ready for the fray. What's the *Meteor* after now? The story of my life? It wouldn't be very interesting reading if I told the truth, I'm afraid."

Peter looked down into her eyes with a glance as merry as her own.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said, smiling, as he took a seat quite close beside her. "Anything about you is good copy these days. Tell me some-

thing about yourself and you'll just see what a good story I can make of it."

There followed a quick fire of light question and light answer. Mindful of his part, Peter worded his queries carefully so as to gain the maximum of information while reducing to the minimum the risk of her suspecting his ulterior motive.

He found out little that he did not already know. It was true that she was rehearsing a large motion picture and to that end had taken a quaint old house in Fulham so as to be near the celebrated motion-picture studio in New Rochambeau. She was working very hard, she said, rehearsing there every day except matinée days, and would be worn out if it were not for the quiet and comfort of her country house. She seemed genuinely pleased with that, as with everything else, Mr. James Flynn included, and if Peter had really been what he appeared, he might have been enjoying himself immensely. As it was, he was on pins and needles, while the minutes sped away. At last he saw an opening and plunged in.

"All this is very well in its way, Miss Gale," he said, gaily, "but I wish we could get up something new for you. Stage a fake jewel robbery at your country house, or something. You haven't worked that yet, I know." His laughter was most infectious. "Your house at Fulham sounds like just the right sort of place to pull off some stunt of the kind."

"It would be," responded Miss Gale, echoing

Peter's laugh. "But don't you think jewel robberies are a little stale?"

"Yes, they are," replied Peter, lightly. "If it was only possible to fake up some sort of gory murder without injuring the corpse, we'd have something that would make 'em sit up and take notice. There's a peach of a murder case going on somewhere in Jersey now, with all the thrills in it you could possibly wish. Have you seen it in the papers?"

As he spoke he swiftly unfolded the copy of the *Planet* which had been in his hand all the while, and laid it, staring headlines upward, across her golden knees.

Peter did not look at the paper. Instead, his eyes were fixed upon her face. There was not a tremor that he could discover. The "war paint" of which she had spoken so lightly might, perhaps, have proved a friend in need, for not the slightest change of colour betrayed her.

"Oh, that?" she said, easily, slightly shifting her position so that the paper fell to the floor. "I don't read the horrors much. They aren't in my line." And indeed she did not look as if they were. A gay, pleasure-loving woman, still young, though not in her first youth, with the incense of popularity in her nostrils, was all that Viola Gale appeared at that period of her career.

"Turn over to the sporting page," she continued with an eagerness which Peter felt might have been

used to cloak a different feeling. "I've a good fat bet up on Rainbow for to-morrow's race. I want to see what he's done to-day. I do hope——"

The sound of many daintily shod feet passing along the hall outside interrupted her. Bells buzzed in several near-by dressing rooms. A new light came into the dazzling blue eyes of Viola Gale.

"Never mind it now, Mr. Flynn," she cried, hastily. "The curtain's going up, and I haven't much time left. Make up any pretty story you like about me, and I won't kick if it isn't true, if you make it pretty enough."

"Shall I tell 'em you were too ill to play last night, and that Miss Vaughn was Magnolia for the first act, and that she did so well nobody got wise?" asked Peter, smiling at her with mischief (serious mischief, though this was not apparent) in his eyes.

Miss Gale glanced at him sharply. For the first time her beautiful face showed traces of emotion.

"No," she said, quickly and with emphasis. "Cecelia Vaughn can wait for her advertising till she earns it. I've worked for years out in Frisco and never got my chance till this season. I didn't have any rich backers to push me along like she has. Don't say anything about last night, Mr. Flynn. I was a fool to——"

Peter was sure she caught back the rest of the sentence, though apparently she interrupted herself to give some direction to the dresser who had been

going quietly about the little gay room, putting it in order.

Peter would have given much to hear the end of that sentence; would have given still more to fathom the depths which he felt must lurk behind those wonderful eyes, shallow though they seemed. He longed to question her sharply, imperatively, but the time was not yet ripe. He must run no risk of putting her on her guard. And there was no opportunity left, for Miss Gale received her summons to the stage almost immediately thereafter, and when the elevator had dropped them to the wings she bade "Mr. Flynn" a hurried but friendly good-night.

"Don't say anything about my being ill yesterday," she whispered, with finger upraised. "Remember, I won't see you again if you do!" She was laughing but there was a note of serious intent in her voice. "I trust you Mr. Flynn," and she gave him the full benefit of her glorious eyes.

A moment later a wild burst of applause announced the fact that Viola Gale was still playing her part before an enthusiastic audience.

CHAPTER XIII

Inspector Winkle Propounds a New Theory

AND I think that's about all, O'Malley," said Peter Clancy, in proper person.

It was the morning of Saturday, April second, and the murder of "Walter Brown" was not yet two days old. It occupied its place of prominence in the pages of the press and there were many significant hints as to what the police had found out and were, for the present, keeping to themselves.

"All bunk," said Peter, tapping the open paper which lay on the desk before his partner, Captain O'Malley, late of the New York police but now pursuing the career of private detective in collaboration with his young and talented friend. "Don't believe they know anything we aren't wise to, nor a lot that we are. I'll see Winkle this morning and find out what they've got. Have to make up to him and get a photo of the body if I can. You get the dope on every person on that list, and keep tabs on the ones I've marked, old man. I'll call you up as usual."

In pursuance of his plan Peter Clancy found himself some little time later at the police station in

Morrisville, sitting comfortably in a chair in Inspector Winkle's private office. The chair was tilted back and the feet of Mr. Clancy rested on Inspector Winkle's desk. Apparently all the leisure in the world was his, and all his idle thoughts were centred on the fishing trip which, he informed the inspector, had been postponed but not abandoned. He had just dropped in to find out what was doing in the case of Walter Brown, while Mr. Carlisle was running about making some purchases. The fact of the matter was that Peter had telephoned Harrison Carlisle to drive over to the police station for him at one o'clock, not earlier, and he knew that he had plenty of time for the task which he had set himself.

He had spent nearly half an hour ingratiating himself with Inspector Winkle and had achieved such success that the worthy police officer was so impressed by Peter's admiration of his attainments and his way of conducting the case that he was in a position to be turned inside out like an old glove. This Peter did, figuratively speaking, finger by finger, and found, to his surprise, for he had thought Inspector Winkle a man of more intelligence, that the old officer had evolved a new theory, entirely out of his own head, to the astounding effect that Walter Brown had been dropped to the terrace from an aeroplane.

It was in vain that Peter pointed out the incontrovertible fact that Walter Brown had been inside the Hood house, and had only left it a few

minutes before he was killed; that Walter Brown's own footsteps gave incontestable evidence that he himself ran to the spot where he met his death; that there was only a slight contusion on the head proving that it was impossible for him to have fallen from any great height. So in love was the inspector with the up-to-dateness of his theory that his faith in it remained unshaken.

Finding this, Peter cheerfully refrained from pressing the point. He hoped that Winkle's change of front would keep the police and the newspapers off the subject of Louis Hood for the present, and give him a chance to prove his own, quite different theory.

After agreeing with the inspector that strange things did happen, and that in the present age very little was impossible, he gently led the conversation to the question of Walter Brown's identity. On this the inspector had no further inspiration to offer. He now rejected Louis Hood's story in toto, hinting darkly that Hood had his own secrets, perhaps, but that they had nothing to do with the death of Walter Brown, the presence of whose dead body on his doorstep had aided Hood in covering a succession of circumstances which, for some occult purpose, unexplained, the inspector thought Hood wished to conceal.

Peter could but marvel at the proneness of human nature to twist facts to meet a preconceived pet idea,

and was grateful in his heart to the training of his old friend O'Malley, who had insisted, at the outset of his career, that Peter should always keep an open mind, subject to change without notice, until every known fact fell into place and made a perfect whole. He would do it now, he insisted firmly to himself. He would not pretend to write Q. E. D. at the end of the problem until every proposition in the whole intricate sum was axiomatic in its clarity.

It took no effort on Peter's part to refrain from sarcastic comments upon the pampered child of Inspector Winkle's brain. The more lusty the child grew, the better for his purpose. He contented himself with the suggestion that the newspapers would give ample space to Winkle's new theory and returned to his immediate purpose.

"They've asked for a picture of the murdered man to run in the papers, I suppose," he said, casually. "I haven't seen one yet. Have you had any photos taken?"

"Sure," said Winkle. "They'll be out this evening. No objection to that. In fact, it should have been done before, only I didn't want to be in too much of a hurry giving things out." He winked, knowingly. "Keep the public on the jump and you'll get more space and notoriety, my boy. Just remember that. If you shoot all of your rockets up at one clip, the show's soon over. Just you watch the papers to-night and you'll see some story,

believe me," and the inspector rubbed his fat hands with satisfaction.

"To-night," thought Peter. Would that be early enough for his purpose? He wanted to catch Miss Viola Gale before she left the theatre after the matinée that afternoon. The papers might be out in time, but a newspaper cut leaves much to the imagination at times. It would be better. . . .

"Let's see the photograph. Did you get a good one?" said Peter, in an off-hand manner.

"Say, boy, we got a corker. Face not disfigured, you know, and—well see for yourself"; and the inspector took several unmounted prints from the drawer of his desk and tossed them to Peter.

"Good-looking chap, enough, wasn't he?" said Peter, studying the face. "Mind if I take one of these for a souvenir? It's a little fad of mine. I've got a sort of—what you'd call a memory book, I guess. Kind of kiddish, I suppose," apologetically. "But then——"

"You aren't much more than a kid, are you, Mr. Peter Clancy?" Inspector Winkle laughed from the heights of his superior years and experience. "Sure. Take one along if you like. Memory book, eh?" he chuckled to himself. "Some kid," shaking his head and a considerable portion of his rotund body, "I'll tell the world."

His purpose accomplished, Peter waited somewhat impatiently for Harrison Carlisle's appearance.

Punctual to the minute he came, and a few seconds later they were speeding along the smooth road to Fern Hills.

"Well, old top, tell us the news," cried Carlisle as soon as he had greeted Peter. "How are things going? I talked to Louis over the 'phone, but his replies were sort of unsatisfactory, though he said he'd heard from you."

"Yes," said Peter. "I got him on the wire early this morning, though there really isn't much to report yet. The best news I've had I got here," and he laughed as he disclosed the wonderful new theory of Inspector Winkle.

"I thought he had some brains last night," Peter continued. "It only goes to show, as O'Malley says, that you never can tell. Would you think any man could be such a fool, in the face of all the facts?"

"But, Peter," hazarded Carlisle, "it does seem to me that Winkle's theory is as good as any I can imagine, crazy as it is. When an impossible thing happens——"

"An impossible thing never happens, Harry," said Peter, seriously, "you can bet your last buck on that."

"You have a theory of your own then, Peter," said Carlisle, eagerly looking into his friend's face. "A theory that——"

"I have no theory, Harry." The gravity of

Clancy's face deepened. "I'm carefully keeping my mind clear of all theories. What I'm dealing in is facts. I don't know yet who committed the crime, but I know"—he paused and repeated slowly, emphatically—"I know how the murder was done."

"Good God!" gasped Carlisle. "You don't mean that you've solved——"

"Only part of it, old man, so keep your shirt on. I know how it was done, but I don't know by whom, or why. And of course the two hang together. Hood says no one but himself knew Walter Brown was in Fern Hills. Then how could it have happened? Someone must have known, or else——" He paused again and seemed plunged so deep in thought that Carlisle forebore, with his usual consideration, to speak.

After a while Peter roused himself and spoke again, changing the subject abruptly.

"How's your mother?" he asked. "She isn't worried at all, is she?"

"Well, there you are," answered Carlisle, with angry impatience. "She wouldn't have been a bit if—— You know our old stand-by, the New York *Stick*, I call it, had a very good, quiet account of what happened Thursday night, and if she'd read only that, everything would have been all right; but, as luck would have it, they take the *Planet* in the kitchen, and that fool Hoki (I suppose he can't read English) brought it in by mistake last night. Mother

was awfully upset over what it hinted about poor Louis—hinted like a steam-siren, you might say. Anyhow, nobody could miss it, and Mother's no fool. She took it standing, like the old brick she is, but, oh, Peter, I wish you'd hurry up and set all our minds at rest."

"Too damn bad," said Peter, feelingly, "but Winkle's theory's going to be aired in all its airiness in to-night's papers, and Hood wasn't up in an aeroplane that night. Everybody knows that, so that lets him out, you see." He laughed and went on rather hastily: "Speaking of Hood, who was that he 'phoned to Thursday night, after we got over to your house, do you know? A lady, wasn't it? I thought I heard——"

"Yes, so did I. It was Sylvia Farquhar. He's been in love with her like most of the rest of us," Carlisle smiled a trifle sadly, "ever since she was a kid. He and Robert Kent and——"

"Robert Kent?" interjected Peter with a slight lift of the brows. "I rather thought——"

"Oh, yes," said Harrison, musingly, "Robert, too. We're all crazy about Sylvia, and you wouldn't wonder if you could see her. She's so beautiful, so gracious, so kind to everybody, that it's impossible to guess—— But I think, myself, that Louis will be the winner in the long run. He has the start of us all. He's known her ever since she was a little girl. They both lived in Philadelphia then. I didn't know her

till they moved to New York, and I don't think Kent did, either. He's a distant cousin of Louis's, you know, and they've been sort of rivals in this as in most things. But I'm putting all my money on Louis. He beat us all at college, and he's made something of himself since, which is more than I can say. I can't, somehow, get really interested in anything but sport," regretfully; "even Robert works harder than I ever thought of doing. He has a lot of things he's interested in, though I don't think he sticks to anything much more seriously than I do. He got me interested in a real-estate scheme the summer he spent out here. It was one of the years Louis and his mother were abroad, and Rob had Louis's house for the season—or rather his sister, Mrs. Fayle, took it, and Rob was with her most of the summer. The thing looked promising, the real-estate scheme, I mean, but it fell through and we both lost a lot of money—though I don't regret it, for it gave me something to think of besides Sylvia." He spoke the girl's name with a tenderness and regret that was infinitely touching.

"Tell me something more about her," said Peter, after a short silence in which his friend's face had remained sadly thoughtful. "Is it Miss or Mrs. Farquhar?"

"Why, 'Miss,' of course," answered Harrison, in surprise. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly," said Peter, medita-

tively, "I had a sort of idea—I don't know where I got it—that she might have been married, and that it hadn't turned out well. You're sure she couldn't have been—secretly, perhaps?"

Harry Carlisle shook his head in complete denial.

"Where you ever got such a crazy idea I can't imagine, Peter. But there's nothing in it. I've known her very well for years and there's never been the slightest suggestion——"

"You're sure?" persisted Peter, with his eyebrows drawn together in concentrated thought. "You're certain there was no such thing as an unfortunate marriage—a husband who disappeared and was supposed to be dead——"

"Heavens, no, Peter! What on earth put such a thing into your head? Why, her whole life has been as open as the day," said Carlisle, warmly. "No hint of scandal has ever touched Sylvia Farquhar. You can be sure of that."

Peter's mind had been intensely active, reviewing a quite possible, though somewhat romantic conjunction of circumstances, involving a possible motive for the crime in which his every faculty was absorbed. The unexpected return of a lover or husband, supposed to be dead, just at the moment when Louis Hood's success with the object of his affections was almost in sight, would, if found to be true, present an adequate motive. . . . In the face of Harry's better knowledge, however, this

seemed untenable. Peter abandoned it for the moment though it still lurked in the background of his mind.

"All right, Harry, I'm a nut," said Peter, easily. "I'll admit I get crazy ideas once in a while. But I'm interested in Miss Farquhar. Tell me something more about her. Who is she? Has she any family? I just sort of thought—well, put it down to curiosity."

"I don't quite see what you're after, Peter," said Carlisle, puzzled. "But of course I'd just as soon tell you about her. She's an orphan, and lives all alone. Her father and mother died years ago and left her and her brother very well off."

"She had a brother, then," said Peter, carelessly, though he felt his ears pricking up. "Is he dead, too?"

"I don't know, Peter. I think so. I don't know much about him, except that I understand he ran rather wild after he came into his property. I didn't know Sylvia then, myself, but Louis did. He could tell you anything you want to know. But I don't see——"

Peter had been leaning forward, one arm resting on the side of the seat, his gaze fixed on his friend. Now he sank back on the cushions and regarded the road ahead with unseeing eyes.

"No, no, I don't suppose you do, old man," he murmured, thoughtfully, "and I can't tell you just

yet. You'll have to trust me if you can, and don't worry," he added, in a different tone. "Things are dark, but by gad, they're clearing—clearing." He relapsed into a silence which remained unbroken until they reached Carlisle's home.

CHAPTER XIV

An Interlude

SO YOU can set your mind at rest about the papers making any more trouble for Mr. Hood for the present, Mrs. Carlisle," said Peter Clancy, leaning toward his hostess, and patting the plump old hand which lay near him upon the polished mahogany of the table. "As I told Mr. Hood over the 'phone just now, the papers will be so occupied with Inspector Winkle's new theory, not realizing, perhaps, how absurd it is, that they'll leave him alone. It will make a corking story, and, after all, that's what the press cares most about." And he smiled confidently into the now hopeful face of the old lady.

Peter had been doing justice to a hearty and delicious luncheon while he outlined to Mrs. Carlisle the new and novel theory of Inspector Winkle to which he had just referred. The old lady's bitterness at the unjust attack on Louis Hood was by this time somewhat alleviated by Peter's words, and she expressed her approval of him and them by a cordial, friendly smile.

"You certainly are a comfort to us all, Mr.—no,

no, Peter," she said, quickly, as that engaging young man shook his red head at her. "I don't know what we'd do without him, do you, Harry?"

"Old Red-top is on the job, Mother. You can depend on him," grinned Carlisle, serving himself to some more of the exquisitely dressed salad, which the inimitable Hoki tendered at his elbow. "Have some more, Peter," he recommended, earnestly. "You won't get a salad like this every day."

Peter helped himself lavishly and watched the clever Japanese as he left the room. When the door was closed he returned to the subject which occupied all their thoughts, and it was not until luncheon was over that he drew Harrison aside and spoke to him earnestly.

"Your mother's awfully pleased with that butler of yours, Harry," he said, "and I hate to make any trouble. But he's hitting the pipe on the quiet. I know the signs. It's a pet vice of the race, and, take it from me, you'd better watch him."

He said no more, but he said this so seriously that his words had the desired effect. Harrison promised that he would keep his eyes open, and the young men sauntered together into the living room where Mrs. Carlisle awaited them.

The day had turned unexpectedly warm, and all the windows had been thrown open. The belated spring had decided at last to bring itself up to date in a leap, and the temperature had risen in less than

twenty-four hours to summer heat, as is the custom of our versatile climate. It seemed scarcely possible that two days before snow had been lying thick where now the green grass glistened in the hot sun. Buds were swelling on the boughs where birds basked and sang their song of newly awakened life and joy.

"It's very warm, isn't it?" said Mrs. Carlisle, fanning herself as she sat in her big winged chair. "I always feel these sudden changes very much. I suppose it's because I'm growing fat—and old."

"You old, Mother!" exclaimed Harry, laughing. "You'll never be old, dear. Will she, Peter? You should see her after black bass up in Maine. She can cast sitting in a boat as well as any man I know, and she lands her fish every time, no matter what sort of fight he puts up."

"If she doesn't strike a lot of bad leaders, as we did yesterday, eh, Harry?" laughed Peter. "I don't think she really believed that story, do you?"

"Well, it did sound a trifle fishy, I admit," said Harry, "but it was true, just the same, Mother. I tested the whole lot, even the ones I had at home, and they're all rotten, every one. It's an infernal shame, too, for I've just received a permit this noon to fish at the Plympton Reservoir and I'd beat it over there this afternoon if I had any decent tackle."

"Oh, my dear boy," said Mrs. Carlisle, with a serious air of concern which was very attractive in a

woman of her years, "isn't that too bad! The reservoir is alive with trout, I know. I saw them jumping when I drove over there with the Ainslees a week ago. Isn't there some way you could get good leaders? How about Conger's in Morrisville? They have tackle."

"Yes, they have, confound 'em! That's where I got this last lot of leaders, and I'll be damned—excuse me, Mother—I'll be—whatever you like—if I'll ever buy another cent's worth from Conger as long as I live. Why, Peter had a fish on yesterday morning——"

"Couldn't you get some from Louis?" interrupted Mrs. Carlisle, whose sporting instincts were thoroughly aroused. "He must have tackle out here."

"Oh, I don't like to bother Louis," said Harry, giving his head a quick jerk. "He's got trouble enough, and it would seem sort of heartless."

"I can't see what good you'd be doing him, staying at home a beautiful day like this," objected Mrs. Carlisle. The happiness and pleasure of her dear boy took, after all, the first place in her heart. "If there were anything you could do for Louis——"

"There isn't a thing he could do, Mrs. Carlisle," said Peter, earnestly, "and he'd be lots better off doing something amusing. Wish I could go along, but I can't—worse luck. I'll have to be in town by four o'clock."

"Well, there's no use talking about it, anyway,"

said Harry, disconsolately. "I haven't any decent tackle, so that settles it."

"Harry!" cried Mrs. Carlisle, brightening suddenly, "I have it! Robert Kent's tackle is all here. He's so perfect he'll be sure to have the best of everything, and he couldn't possibly mind your taking a few leaders."

"By George, Mother, you certainly are a wonder!" exclaimed Harry, laughing aloud. "I never thought of Rob's stuff. Of course! That's the very ticket! He must have every kind of tackle known to man in that outfit of his. Come on, Pete, and see it. It's something to make your mouth water. Even beats his clothes for being the real thing."

"Is it so wonderful, Harry?" said Mrs. Carlisle, her eyes dancing with the amusement of her ever-youthful spirit. "If it's any better than his clothes, I'd like to see it."

"Come along then, old dear. You have a treat before you," and Harry led the way up the broad staircase, his mother following with a step surprisingly light and quick for one of her age and build, and Peter, scarcely less entertained, bringing up the rear.

The room which was still considered Robert Kent's, for he was expected back that evening, was charming in its exquisite neatness and comfort, and had been prepared for his return even to a vase of fresh flowers, which Hoki, who delighted in the opportunity for displaying his taste, always arranged, and which he

had but now placed upon the dressing table. He was leaving the room as they entered it and lingered a moment in the hall, listening, perhaps, for their comments upon the effect of the artistically arranged feathery sprays of forsythia against the dully gleaming mahogany.

If this was his purpose, he was doomed to disappointment, for the minds of his employers and their guest were centred on one object only.

"There are his rods," said Harry, pointing to a large bundle of them standing in the corner of the spacious closet the door of which he had thrown open. "That's his suitcase, and this must be his tackle outfit. Now, boy, you'll see something worth while," and he lifted the smaller one of the two leather bags, carried it out into the room, and placed it on a low stool, made for the purpose, which stood beside the empty fireplace. He knelt beside it.

Mrs. Carlisle was about to seat herself, preparatory to enjoying in full the examination of trout flies, artificial bait, reels, and all the paraphernalia of what was still her favourite sport, when an ejaculation of disappointment from her son checked her.

"Oh, dammit all!" cried Harry, sitting back on his heels, "the bag is locked, of course! Might have known it would be. My own tackle bag is the one thing in the house I do lock up. Well, I'm dished for this afternoon, confound it! I think I'll go into town with you, Peter, and get some good leaders

at Abersvail and Finche's. They have a new kind of Japanese silk-worm gut that I want to try, and——"

"Harry, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Carlisle, folding her hands across her ample front, and looking down at him with superior resourcefulness, "you just wait a minute before you give up. Trust your old mother not to be stopped by a mere trifle." And without explaining further, she left the room, chuckling to herself.

She returned in a moment jingling an enormous bunch of keys, the collection of a lifetime, in her hand.

"If you don't find one here that will fit," she beamed, "my name's not Mary Carlisle."

"But, Mother," objected Harry, though it must be admitted that his remonstrance was only half-hearted, "wouldn't you be at all ashamed of burglarizing a man's locked tackle box?"

"No, my dear, I wouldn't," said Mrs. Carlisle, stoutly. "If it were anything else, I wouldn't consider it for an instant. But this is a case of necessity. You can't go fishing for trout without good leaders. That's all there is about it. I'll explain to Rob, myself, when he comes back to-night," she added, with dignity, "and he'll be sure to understand. Any sportsman would."

Harrison looked at his mother with amused appreciation, and casting a quizzical glance at Peter, whose enjoyment of the situation was only less apparent, he bent to his task.

He tried a great number of the more promising-looking keys before his labours were rewarded.

"What did I tell you?" cried Mrs. Carlisle, with delighted triumph, as the lock at last turned smoothly over. "That bunch of keys never fails, except with some of these new-fangled Yale locks, of course. I've opened more trunks for people who'd forgotten their keys, and—— Oh!" as Harry raised the lid of the leathern case, "oh, my! oh, my! what a beautiful arrangement! How complete! There's a place for —— Oh, my dear, just let me look!" and the sporting old lady drew up her chair and gazed upon the interior of the box with all the ardour of a young mother over her first bassinette.

Peter was so entertained with watching the old lady that it was several minutes before he could turn his attention to the object of her enthusiasm. When he did so, at length, he found it equal to Harry's prediction. There was everything there that a fisherman's heart could desire, it would seem. There were fly books, with flies of every conceivable size and colour, from the gay Parmacheeni Belle down to the modest but effective Gray Hackle. There was a japanned box of English dry flies, so small and delicate that they had to be lifted out of their little glazed nests with a pair of small pincers provided for the purpose. There were hooks, ranging in size from the tiny ones in which the English dry flies were tied to the large ones used for tarpon fishing, a sport in

which even Harry admitted Rob could give him cards and spades. There were reels, large and small, each in its elegant little leather case. The beauty of workmanship and the effectiveness of the mechanism of these latter especially interested Peter, who had not had Harry's opportunities of testing them. He played with them, fascinated, all the while Harry and his mother were looking over the rest of the outfit and selecting the leaders of which Harry stood in need.

"Well," said Mrs. Carlisle at last with a little sigh, "that has done me good! Next to fishing itself, I do love to play with the tackle, don't you, Harry? I suppose Peter thinks we're—what do you boys say? Nuts? Yes, nuts! But is there anything prettier than a trout fly, really?" She caressed a gaudy Royal Coachman with the tip of her finger before she closed the fly book and put it carefully back in its place.

Peter had gone over to the window the better to examine a fine tarpon reel, which was one of the collection. He returned as Mrs. Carlisle spoke, and answered her remark with a little smile as he fitted the reel case into its appointed place.

"We're all nuts together, Mrs. Carlisle," he said. "I suppose other people would find it hard to understand the fascination of catching even a very little trout, and tarpon fishing must be great. What sort of line do you use for tarpon, Harry? Are there any here?"

"Don't see any," said Carlisle, running a leader through his fingers and testing it thoroughly. "But it's just an ordinary heavy linen line."

"You wouldn't think linen would hold a big fish like that, even if it were made into a cable," said Peter, glancing at a picture on the wall which showed one of the great fish leaping in the air. "I should think you'd need a steel line."

Carlisle laughed.

"That shows how much old Red-top really knows, doesn't it, Mother," he jeered. "Imagine a steel line! Why, one of those big fellows, Peter, would put a kink in it and snap it off like a—like a pipe stem. Never mind your ignorance, old chap. We'll take you down to Florida next winter, if you'll come, and show you some real sport, won't we, Mother?"

"We'd love to have you come, Peter," said Mrs. Carlisle, enthusiastically. "Couldn't you manage it somehow? We'd have a delightful time, and we could go into the lake country after bass—and there's wonderful shooting. Do say you'll try to do it!"

"I'd love to, Mrs. Carlisle," said Peter with a warm feeling at his heart. He had made a good many friends, had this homely, pleasant young man, but not many had made him feel so much at home, so contented and cared for, as had these two kindly people. There is a *camaraderie* among those who love the same sport, fishing especially perhaps, which

is a thing by itself and quite apart from the ordinary relationships of our semi-social humanity.

Peter, looking at his watch, sighed a little. Possibly because it was time to bring this pleasant interlude to an end. Possibly because of the grave and serious business to which he must now return. He made his warm and grateful adieux to Mrs. Carlisle, promising to return at the earliest possible moment, again expressed his regret that he could not accompany Harry upon this afternoon's fishing expedition, and as Harry was now ready to start in quest of the speckled beauties, Peter availed himself of the opportunity, and went with him in his car as far as the station in Fern Hills, which Harry insisted was directly on his way.

Peter, who had still a few minutes left before train time, watched his friend drive away. As the swift car vanished in the distance the smile which he had worn in bidding Harry good-bye vanished from his face, and was superseded by a look which was grave and serious, almost threatening in its solemnity.

"Fishers——" he muttered to himself, following the thought suggested by the incidents of the afternoon, "fishers—— Where have I heard it? 'Fishers of men' . . . of men—and women. . . . Well," with a shrug, "all fishing is sport, after a fashion. But Harry's sort has no ugliness in it—none. While mine . . . ?"

He pulled himself together as the train whistled

beyond the curve of shining rails, and threw back his head.

"It's your job, Peter," he said to himself, firmly. "wherever it leads, remember that. No flinching. Forward—March!"

And with mind, from this moment, solely concentrated on the serious problem which he had undertaken to solve, Peter was whirled away toward the great city in whose maze he now expected, confidently, to pick up a thread which would lead him to ultimate success.

CHAPTER XV

A Frame-up?

MISS VIOLA GALE had triumphantly completed that afternoon the one hundredth performance of "The Wishing Stile." It was an event heralded in the press, and fittingly commemorated by the presentation to the crowded audience of alluring photographs of the star in all her beauty, signed by her own fair hand.

As the shadows of the tall buildings began to lengthen across Times Square the enthusiastic crowd poured out of the theatre, and in many a matinée-girlish heart was raised the longing to look and be exactly like the heroine of "The Wishing Stile", the photograph of whom was clutched tightly between white-gloved fingers.

In the meantime, the subject of all this admiration was rapidly changing to street clothes in her gay little dressing room. Her cheeks from which the rouge had been removed were flushed with triumph. The air was heavy with the scent of a multitude of flowers, and the heat, owing to the unseasonable sultriness of the day, was almost intolerable. But Viola Gale gave no heed to the oppressiveness of the atmosphere.

She sang and laughed as, with the deft aid of the dresser, she rapidly donned her outer garments, and, flinging open the door, let in her congratulatory manager and a crowd of eager young reporters.

If she had looked for the cheerful, freckled face and red head of Mr. James Flynn, representing the New York *Meteor*, she would not have seen them, but that young man bore no place in her thoughts.

It was not until she had shaken off the last of the regular representatives of the press by laughingly closing the door of her handsome little car in their eager faces; it was not until the car was actually in motion, that she was reminded of him in rather a startling and forcible manner.

A red head suddenly appeared at the car door opposite the pavement, as, lightly and quietly as a cat, a young man leaped to the running board, opened the door, closed it softly and, without a word, seated himself beside her.

"Well, of all the nerve!" exclaimed Viola Gale, indignantly, reaching for the tube which communicated with the chauffeur upon the seat outside, "I never——"

Peter Clancy touched her arm.

"Drop it!" he said, quietly, but with so much of menace in his steel-blue eyes that she gazed at him in real or pretended amazement.

"I have a lot to say to you, Miss Gale, and it's very important both to you and to—others that you

should hear me out." Peter's voice was keen and cold and his eyes never left her face.

"But I have given an interview to the *Meteor* already," she said, frowning and biting her red lip. "It was the *Meteor*, wasn't it?"

"It's not the *Meteor* now, whatever it may have been," said Peter, throwing off the last remnant of disguise. "The story I'm getting from you now isn't necessarily for publication."

"The story you're getting from me?" she repeated, angrily. "You seem very sure of yourself Mr. — Mr. Flynn!"

"Nothing to it," said Peter, crisply. "My name is Clancy. It's just possible you may have heard of me, though horrors aren't in your line, I remember you said. I'm a private detective."

She started at this and looked at Peter curiously. He watched her face intently as he added, slowly, seriously, with pauses between the short, curt sentences, "I'm working on a murder case—the case of Walter Brown. . . . He was killed Thursday night in Fern Hills at the residence of Mr. Louis Hood."

If he expected that she would betray herself at this startling announcement Peter was doomed to disappointment. The woman gazed at him blankly, but he could not see even a trace of fear in her eyes.

"Perhaps you don't know anything about it," said Peter, with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"I think you must be crazy," cried Viola Gale, swiftly reaching again for the speaking tube.

Peter caught her wrist this time firmly in his hand, unheeding the possibility of being observed by any one in the crowd through which they were passing.

"Why did you scream outside the wall of Louis Hood's place on Thursday night?" he whispered in her ear. "Did something frighten you?"

She dropped the tube as if it had burned through her spotless white glove.

"My God!" she breathed. "What—what do you mean?"

"I'm curious to know what explanation you have to offer for your presence there," said Peter, eyeing her watchfully, "exactly at the time of the murder."

A strange look came over the beautiful face, but Viola Gale made no reply.

The car slowed down and stopped before a rather flamboyant apartment house in Fifty-seventh Street.

"You live here?" Peter questioned.

The woman nodded.

"I have an apartment—to rest between performances," she said in a stifled voice.

"You must see that we have a lot to say to each other, Miss Gale," said Peter. "You will let me come in with you so that we can talk quietly." There was authority in every word.

He stepped out of the car and turned to give her his hand in alighting. She ignored it and spoke to the chauffeur.

"At seven-thirty, John," she said, mechanically, and as one in a daze, crossed the sidewalk.

Peter did not speak as he opened the doors for her to pass. In the elevator he regarded her averted face in silence. It was not until the trim maid, who opened the door of the apartment, had left them alone that Peter spoke.

"You'd better sit down," he said, noting the pallor of her face, "and let me take your wrap. It's stifling in here."

She did not reply, but sank upon a couch, letting her fur-trimmed coat drop from her shoulders. For a moment Peter thought she was going to faint. Hastily, he crossed to the windows and threw them wide. The air that came in was heavy and enervating. The sky was darkened in the west by lowering clouds, though the sun still shone redly. There was a strange light in the frivolous, perfumed room—a lurid red light, casting greenish shadows. In its rays, the woman, in all the gay trappings of her success, sat as if turned to ice.

Peter drew up a chair and seated himself deliberately.

"Come, now, Miss Gale, let's get down to cases."

His voice was cold and hard, without a trace of pity or compunction. At the sound of it she stirred

and shivered, but her eyes remained fixed, with an expression as if she saw nothing.

"You carried things off very well last night, when I called your attention to the murder at Fern Hills," Peter went on, "but it won't do, Miss Gale. You can't fool me. I know too much."

Still she said nothing.

"Come, come," said Peter, impatiently, insistently, "you can't get away with it like this. You'd better make a clean breast of it. I know you were only an accomplice—that you had nothing to do with the actual murder of Walter Brown."

At the name she roused herself and the faintest tinge of colour crept into her set face.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, with a visible effort. "I never even heard of Walter Brown, and as far as I know, I've never been in Fern Hills in my life."

Peter gazed at her steadily for a moment and then shook his head.

"Not good enough, Miss Gale. Pretty fair try, but you can't put it across." He leaned forward and his steely glance was unwavering. "You went with the murderer to Fern Hills Thursday afternoon in a good, closed car that had an almost new Farnsworth Link tire on the right rear wheel. You reached Mr. Hood's place a little before seven. You left the car just west of the boundary of the estate and walked on, by yourself, along the road, until you were

opposite the house. Then you hid in the bushes outside the wall—and did what you were sent there to do."

The woman drew a sharp, hissing breath and her hands clutched and clung together in her lap. Her nostrils quivered and her eyes dilated but remained fixed on vacancy. Not once had she looked at Peter.

"When it was over," Peter went on, sternly, "you hurried back to the car, where your companion joined you at once. You drove to Lounsberry, reaching the station just as the 6:59 train came in. You separated there. He went off in the car and you took the train to New York. You wore a yashmak veil, I think they call 'em, but the train was hot, and as you were in the rear seat, you felt safe in taking it off. It was a foolish thing to do, Miss Gale. You're much too well known."

She had been listening intently, though her face, pale and rigid, had not changed in its awful, still expression. Now she slipped down sidewise among the cushions and covered her face with her hands.

"You see how much I know already," said Peter, following up his advantage. "It'll be easy to find out the rest, but I can do it quicker with your help. You spill what you know and I'll see you're taken care of, understand. If you tell me the whole story without holding anything back, if you confess who it was who killed Walter Brown——"

She roused herself at that, and raising her head, for the first time looked Peter straight in the eyes.

"Impossible!" she cried in a controlled voice, "I don't know anything about any—any murder. I never heard of this Walter Brown."

Peter swiftly drew out the photograph he had obtained from the police and placed it before her.

"Perhaps you'll tell me you never saw this face before," he said, thrusting his head forward and regarding her intently.

She started convulsively and drew back.

"Wallace," she breathed, "Wallace Farnham!"

Then she leaned forward, drooping her head above the portrait. Her aureole of bright gold hair hid her face.

"Wallie," she whispered, softly, after a moment. "Poor old Wallie." She looked up at Peter suddenly. "Why are his eyes closed?" she asked, fearfully. "Was he asleep—or——"

"Dead," answered Peter, sternly. "He was murdered at Louis Hood's the night before last—and by your means, if not by your hand."

"My—God!" she cried, brokenly, "not Wallie—— Not poor Wallie! Oh, you can't mean——"

Her surprise and sorrow were apparently so genuine that Peter had to remind himself that she was a clever actress, trained to dissimulation.

"This is the photograph, taken by the police, of the man who was murdered at Louis Hood's house

on Thursday night," said Peter, coldly. "The man who was called Walter Brown."

For a long moment she gazed at the photograph. Then she raised her head and again met Peter's eyes.

"I knew him years ago, in Frisco, when I was a young girl," she said, slowly, in an awed, hushed voice. "You probably won't believe me, but I haven't seen him for almost ten years."

"But you knew where he was most of that time," said Peter, quick to take advantage of her admission.

She shook her head.

"I lost track of him a long time ago and haven't heard from him since," she said. "He went to Japan, I think—— I'm not sure."

"How well did you know him, this long time ago that you speak of?" asked Peter. His eyes were narrowed. Every faculty was on the alert to fathom the depths of her mind, to separate the true from the false.

"I knew him very well, poor Wallie," she said, a little note of tenderness and regret creeping into her troubled voice. "I was only eighteen, and he was—oh, something, I had never known at that time. He was gay and sporty—but different from the kind of men I had run up against. He—— We—— It was only boy and girl stuff—— No harm—— And then I—— I went on the stage—and things happened. . . . He went away—and I never saw

him again." She added the last words in a convincing tone and met Peter's eyes squarely.

Peter was puzzled.

"Then why—why should you have helped do him in?" he asked, studying her intently.

"I didn't! Oh, I didn't!" she cried, confusedly. "I wouldn't have hurt him for the world. For the sake of old times! For——"

"But," exclaimed Peter, "you did help in the plot! Didn't you know——"

"No, no!" she almost screamed, "I didn't know! I never guessed! I—— Oh, my God! I can't understand even now. . . . It's—it's unthinkable! I can't believe what you tell me! There must be some mistake—some——"

"But you did go to Fern Hills," insisted Peter. "You did stand outside the wall at the Hood place and scream, as it was planned you should. You can't deny it, I've got the goods on you. You can't play off innocent to me!"

"I am innocent, just the same!" cried Viola Gale. "I am! I am! I wouldn't have anything to do with—— Oh, I can't understand—I can't think——"

All the carefree almost reckless gaiety which characterized her, had vanished utterly, from the moment Peter had whispered to her in the car. That, he could comprehend. What puzzled him was a something in her manner, since he had made his knowledge of her movements on that fatal night clear

to her; a strange bewilderment, a confused uncertainty, difficult to reconcile with complicity in a criminal plot.

"Let's hear your story of what happened Thursday night," he said, after giving her a moment to regain some portion of her self-control. "If, by some strange fluke, you really are innocent, you can't have any reason for protecting the guilty parties. I'll hear what you have to say and try to believe it. Honest, I will." His tone was perceptibly altered. It was necessary to gain her confidence by any means, so Peter smiled at her reassuringly.

"I—I don't know what to say," she hesitated; "I don't want to give away—I don't want to make trouble for—any one—when—— Oh, I can't believe that there was any harm—that he would deceive me into—with such a thing on his mind. . . . I——"

"Who would deceive you?" prompted Peter. "And how?"

"I won't tell you who," said Viola Gale, closing her lovely lips firmly, "at least, not till I see my way better—and not even then, unless——"

She paused a second, considering deeply. Peter was struck with a momentary sense that the woman had much more character than he had at first supposed. She went on almost at once:

"But I will tell you my part of it and maybe you can see. . . . There must be an explanation,

and you, with your experience, may be able to guess. . . . Well, anyway, here's what happened. I—I don't know exactly where to start. I—I know a man—— He's a—a sort of friend of mine. . . ." Peter gathered from her manner that the man in question was rather more of a friend than she cared to admit. "We've had some business dealings—and we've played the races together and had a great run of luck. . . . Well—he told me he had a bet up about a man he knew—a man named Russell Stowe. He said Stowe was a coward and he wanted to show him up——"

"Yes," said Peter, looking at her watchfully. "Go on."

"It was a big bet, and he said he'd give me half if I'd help him."

"Who said?" asked Peter, quickly. But she was not to be caught so easily.

"My friend," she answered, sharply. "The man I am speaking about. I'm not going to give him away, Mr.——"

"Clancy," supplied Peter.

"Mr. Clancy," she repeated, firmly, "So don't think it. I never double-crossed a pal in my life and it's too late to begin now."

"Not even if I prove to you that he's a rotten criminal? That he killed your old lover, Wallace Farnham; that he entangled you——"

"No, no. Impossible! He never knew Wallie.

It couldn't have been! You'll have to prove it before we can talk," she countered, swiftly, "and I don't believe it, not for a minute! But I'm going to clear my own skirts in any case. I owe that to myself."

"All right," agreed Peter, "shoot! You were to go fifty-fifty on the bet. And what was your part?"

"He had it all thought out," Miss Gale continued, "and it wasn't anything but a lark. He knew Russell Stowe was to be alone in his house in the country last Thursday night. He'd made sure by sending theatre tickets to the two servants, so they'd be out of the way."

Peter drew in his breath quickly and followed her words with ever-increasing attention, though he did not interrupt her by so much as a motion of his hand.

"Mr. Stowe was going to dinner with some friends and was to leave his house at about seven. My part was to wait in the bushes in front of the house until I saw him at the door. Then I was to scream—hard, you know, as if I were being murdered, or something. If he came to my rescue, then it was all off, see? But if he didn't come, why, it would be because he was scared. Didn't want to get mixed up in a row, and all that sort of thing. Do you get the idea?"

"Good lord," said Peter under his breath, "can this be true?" Aloud he only said, "I get you. Go on."

"Well—there's nothing more except that's what

I did, all right. And Mr. Stowe didn't come, though I screamed enough to wake the dead."

"To wake the dead," repeated Peter. "No, not quite enough to wake the dead. If you had, Walter Brown, or Wallace Farnham, as you call him, would have kept on running. But you want me to think you didn't know it was Wallace Farnham?"

"So help me God, I didn't," her words had the solemnity of an oath. "I thought the man I saw for just the shortest second was the owner of the house. I was told that he was tall and thin, and would be dressed in some kind of camping clothes. Well, that's what I saw. It was getting pretty dark, but there was a light in the hall behind him when he opened the door and I saw him pretty plain—not his face. He was too far off for that, and the light was behind him. But he answered the description, and I had no reason to think——"

"That it wasn't Walter Farnham?" said Peter, watching her keenly.

"That it wasn't the owner of the house," she insisted, tensely, "I was told that his name was Russell Stowe. I can't believe even now——"

"And you didn't know the name of the town you were in?" interrupted Peter, incredulously.

"No. I had no idea. I was interested in putting the game across, and didn't think to ask. I knew that it was Jersey, and that we went through Newark. But it was getting dark and I didn't notice much

about the towns we passed. It was mostly country roads after that, anyway."

"You mean you took back roads?"

"I don't know." She spoke as if the idea had not occurred to her until Peter suggested it. "They were kind of lonely, I think, but I don't know the country much."

"So you didn't connect your sporting adventure with the crime at Fern Hills when I showed you the paper last night?" probed Peter. "You had no idea that it concerned you in any way or that Walter Brown was any one you knew? Is that what you want me to think?"

"Whether you believe it or not, it's the truth! I had no idea the man you call Walter Brown was even in this country."

Peter pondered a moment. Then he asked abruptly: "Is this man, the one who took you out to Jersey, I mean, in love with you, Miss Gale?"

She flushed darkly but replied at once:

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she answered, shortly. "I'm sure. I happen to know that he's—that he's in love with another woman."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Yes, but I won't tell you. Certainly not till I see my way clearer. It would be a means of tracking him. I'm not such a fool as not to be wise to that."

"And you'd protect this man who's in love with another woman?" urged Peter, eyeing her curiously.

"That hasn't anything to do with it, Mr. Clancy," she said, coldly. "He's been a pal of mine, and he's backing me up and helping me to make a lot of money, and whatever else they may say of me, no one has ever had reason to say that Vi Gale wasn't a good sport, or wouldn't stand by her friends."

"Very creditable to you, no doubt, Miss Gale, but rough on me," said Peter, with a dour grin. "Now let me see. You don't think, then, that this friend of yours could have been jealous of Walter Brown, or Wallace Farnham, or whatever his name was?"

"Jealous? No. Certainly not. How could he have been, even supposing—why, I never mentioned Wallie's name to him."

"Hmm," said Peter, slowly, thoughtfully, "let me get this straight. You saw a man come to the door—and then you screamed—and nothing happened. . . . So you thought you and your friend had won the bet. Is that right?"

"Yes, and the other man agreed that he had lost."

"The other man?" questioned Peter, quickly. "The other party to the bet? Was he there?"

"Why, yes—yes. Of course he would have had to be there to see for himself."

"Did you see him?" insisted Peter. "Who was he? Would you know him again?"

"Why—why, no," answered Viola Gale, a trace of

uncertainty in her voice. "It was someone who lives in the neighbourhood and he was hidden up near the house. I," she dropped on a lower note, "I didn't see him at all."

"Oh—h—h," said Peter, slowly. "Then what makes you think he was there?"

"I was told that he was, and I naturally supposed that he was, because the bet was settled on the spot."

"You mean you got your share on the nail?"

"Yes."

"Much?" asked Peter, and as she hesitated: "Come, Miss Gale, it must have been a pretty tidy sum to make you willing to be late at that night's performance. How much was it?"

"Seven hundred and fifty," she said, slowly.

"Whew!" whistled Peter, "and that didn't make you suspicious? If that was half, the whole bet must have amounted to fifteen hundred!"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"That wasn't so much to him. I've seen him lose more than that at roulette in a night and never turn a hair. He's a dead game sport, whatever else he is."

"Well, I can't think he treated you very well, Miss Gale, letting you run the risk you did. He didn't even warn you to be careful on the train not to let anybody know who you were, did he?"

"Yes, he did," she answered, defensively. "He

advised me to keep out of sight since I'd sent word to the theatre that I was too ill to be there for the first act. But I didn't think it was very important, and the train was suffocating."

"Well," said Peter, weighing her story carefully in his mind, "your explanation accounts for a lot of things and you've framed it up cleverly."

"I haven't framed it up at all," retorted Viola Gale, furiously. "If there's any frame up, it's yours! I don't believe you can connect either me or my friend with—with this thing you say, you—this crime that's . . . Oh, I'm not going to say anything more. I was on the train and I was somewhere in Jersey Thursday night, but it was just a lark—a bet. I won't believe it was anything else! Neither my friend nor I knew that Wallie Farnham was in this country! What I've told you is the truth. But I won't tell you anything more. I'm sorry I've said as much as I have, only—— Oh, go away, for God's sake, and let me think! I have to go on at eight forty to-night, and how can I ever——"

The strain was telling heavily upon her. She was almost hysterical. Peter was sure he had learned all he could hope for at the present. There was much that he wanted to consider. He must have time to think—to put this and that together.

With a few hurried words he left Viola Gale in the care of her maid and descended to the street. Night was coming swiftly on. The heavy clouds in the

west were rolling in, darkening the greenish sky. Peter glanced about and saw a wiry young man lounging along on the opposite side of the pavement. He crossed quickly over, and went forward until they were abreast.

"On your toes, Rawlins!" said Peter, without looking to right or left. "Keep on 'em!" and passed rapidly out of sight—his thoughts keeping pace with his hurrying feet.

"If Viola Gale's story turns out to be true," he considered within himself, "if she didn't know that Walter Brown was in the country at all—if her friend, the man of the phony bet, didn't know Walter Brown from a hole in the ground—which would seem likely in that case; if she thought that 'Russell Stowe', as she called him, was alone in the house—her sporting friend may have thought so, too, and then—why, then—by gad, of course! Why, then——" he stopped suddenly. "By all that's holy, Pete—it was the wrong man that came out of the house! The wrong man! And if O'Malley's got the results I'm looking for. . . . By the living Jehoshaphat, I see it all! I——"

Dashing madly into the street, he hailed a passing taxi and with thoughts still rushing wildly through his brain was whirled rapidly away.

CHAPTER XVI

"The Name Is——"

"IT WAS blood?"

Peter's words were half question, half statement, and he leaned across the desk looking earnestly into the quiet, wise old eyes of his partner, Captain O'Malley.

"You've said it," said the old man, tersely. "There was mighty little of it, but Van Dorn & Sawyer say there's no doubt. It was human blood. Here's their report."

Peter looked eagerly at the letter which Captain O'Malley placed before him and then leaped to his feet.

"I've got him, O'Malley!" he cried, exultantly. "I see it all clear now! By gad, it was some plot, I'll tell the world. Neat! Neat! It ought to have worked! And if it hadn't been that—— But there's no time to waste. He may be on, even now, damn him for a cold-blooded——" He caught up the telephone instrument from the desk.

"Get me Fern Hills 33," he said, quickly, with his ear to the receiver, and seating himself again, he turned back to speak long and earnestly to his partner.

Several times he interrupted his instructions and explanations to put in calls to different persons. At last he rose hurriedly.

"Don't leave a stone unturned, old man," he said, rapidly. "You know just what to do, and no one in God's world could do it better. I've got to beat it now, but I'll leave this end of the job in your hands. Better keep Rawlins where he is, and you take up the trail of that infernal scoundrel yourself."

"All right, Pete," said O'Malley, alertly, getting lightly to his feet and reaching for his hat. There was a deep gleam in his wary little eyes and he laid his hand on Peter's shoulder with a gesture of affectionate admiration. "You're all to the good, lad," he said, quietly. "I don't believe one man in ten thousand would have——"

"Cut it out, old man," said Peter, with a little smile. "I played in all kinds of luck, and——"

"Knew how to take advantage of it," finished O'Malley. "Lots of 'em don't. So long, and good luck."

The two men parted at the sidewalk, and Peter went rapidly over to Sixth Avenue where he hailed a taxi and was driven down to the Thirty-third Street terminal of the Hudson Tubes.

The slowness of the train which took him to Fern Hills was almost more than he could bear, but it gave him time to go over and over the evidence in the case, sorting and arranging the events in his mind, in their

logical sequence, fitting motives to acts, in view of facts which O'Malley had obtained for him with a celerity and precision bearing eloquent witness to the old man's undiminished powers. Little by little, every obscure circumstance came clear and took its place. By the time he reached Fern Hills, he could have told the story of that fatal night of the thirty-first of March as if he, himself, had been an eye witness. Not an event, not a motive remained unexplained to his keen, analytical mind. Every fact dropped into line and fitted to a hair's breadth.

"Good God, Peter, I can't believe it!"

Harrison caught Clancy by the arm as he descended from the train and pulled him out of earshot of the few other passengers who had alighted at the same time.

"Tell me about it, for Heaven's sake. I'm completely stunned and don't know whether I'm on my head or my feet," and indeed Carlisle looked as if this were the literal truth. "I got what you were driving at over the 'phone, though you mentioned no names, but it doesn't seem possible."

"It's a fact, just the same, Harry," said Peter, grimly. "He's the blackest kind of criminal. The cold, planning, long-headed sort. I've got the goods on him, and I can prove every proposition in the case, even without the help I expect to get from—— But I'll tell you all about that later. Is Louis Hood

here with you?" He asked the question in an altered tone, and Carlisle glanced at him swiftly.

"Yes, I brought him over as you told me to. He's as much up in the air as I am. He's waiting in the car. Other side of the station. This way."

In the faint light reflected from the station lamps Louis Hood's face showed white and troubled, tense with a mixture of horror and relief. Peter grasped the silently extended hand with a heartfelt, firm pressure.

"Get over to Morrisville as fast as God 'll let you, Harry," Peter said, swiftly. "There's room for me on the front seat, too, isn't there? I've got a lot that I want you both to hear, and we can talk best this way. Am I crowding you? No? All right, Harry, shoot!"

The car, the engine of which had been kept running, leaped forward like a live thing, and the lights of the village flashed past in a long luminous blur.

"Did you get old Winkle all right?" Peter had asked, as they shot around the curve of the station driveway.

"Yes," said Harry, keeping his eyes on the road. "He'll be waiting for us, though he wouldn't believe what I told him."

"That I had all the dope? No, he wouldn't," said Peter, grimly. "I suppose he's looking for a new brand of sky-pilot who chucks bodies out of aero-

planes. He'll take a lot of convincing, but it doesn't matter. I know what I know."

"But are you sure, Clancy?" Louis Hood spoke for the first time and his voice was tense with emotion.

"Yes, Hood, I am certain," said Peter, gravely, "and I'll give you the whole story as soon as we get hold of Inspector Winkle. It's a long one, and a damned unpleasant one, and I don't want to go over it twice, for your sake as much as my own. If you'll just be content with the facts, as I have stated them, for a little while, I'll prove to you every proposition I've made. In the meantime——" he hesitated, and then went on with frank sincerity: "In the meantime, I have to make my apologies to you. For one little while I didn't believe you were telling me the entire truth. It seemed——" he hesitated. "I hope you'll forgive me. I run up against all kinds of queer things in my life, and I have to put every person in any way connected with a crime on trial in my own mind. I can't afford to overlook any bet, no matter what the odds are. You see that, don't you?" he asked, a trifle wistfully.

"I'm a lawyer, you know," said Hood, quietly, "and I can fully appreciate your position. So you thought——"

"I didn't go quite so far as to think it," said Peter, quickly, "but I did admit to myself the possibility that—— You see, apparently you were the only person who knew that—— Shall I call him by his

right name? Harry can be trusted, you know, and I don't think there is any possible necessity for its going further."

"You know, then?" Hood's voice was low and deep.

"Yes. I made inquiries and figured out that the man you were so willing to befriend—the man who sometimes called himself 'Walter Brown' and sometimes 'Wallace Farnham'—could be no other than—— You don't mind?"

"No. Harry has a right to the whole story, if anybody has." Hood spoke with feeling and glanced aside at his friend with affection and gratitude.

"Who was it, Peter?" asked Carlisle, eagerly.

"It was Walter Farquhar."

The car swerved violently, but Carlisle brought it back to the road instantly.

"Walter Farquhar?" he repeated, dazedly. "Walter Farquhar? You don't mean——"

"It was Sylvia's brother," Hood replied, sadly. "He'd been in all sorts of trouble and I did not want it to get out—to get into the papers—for her sake."

"I—see," said Harry, slowly, "I see. So that was why you pumped me about Sylvia," he added, leaning over to look in Peter's face. "You suspected——"

"A man needs a strong motive to keep silence, as Mr. Hood did," explained Peter, "and I started at what looked to me the most promising place."

"Peter's got a great old head, Louis," said Carlisle,

admiringly, "and you'd be surprised at the questions, possible and impossible, that he asks. He wanted to know, among other crazy things, if Sylvia had ever been married. What d'you think of that?"

Hood looked hard at Peter, who said, quickly: "It was only an idea that came into my head, don't you see? I know now that it was a crazy one. But a husband, supposed to be dead, and turning up unexpectedly, at the wrong time——" He hesitated, and Louis Hood finished for him.

"Would have been a strong motive for me to have put him out of the way," he said, calmly.

"Yes." Peter's tone was one of deep regret of his momentary suspicion. "And there was the jiu-jitsu business. At first, I couldn't think of anything but that, to account for the man's injuries. You see he might have been killed and, given a tall and very strong man, it was just inside the limit of possibility that the body could have been thrown that far out on the terrace. It seemed so much the only possibility, at first, that I even suspected your butler, Harry. He's unusually tall for a Jap, and you told me yourself that he was up to all the jiu-jitsu tricks. Walter Brown, according to Mr. Hood, had been in some sort of trouble with the natives in Japan. You see how long the cast was. And then, you told me that both you and Hood had taken lessons from Hoki, and——"

"You didn't suspect me, did you, Peter?" asked Carlisle, with a slight grin.

"Might have, if you hadn't been with me all that afternoon and evening," replied Peter, smiling grimly. "Such is my confounded nature. I'd give George Washington and Abraham Lincoln the once over, if they could be shown to have been near the spot, or could have had a possible motive. Not that it really amounts to a suspicion, you understand. It's just a matter of not passing any possibility up till you get the right dope."

"So Walter Brown was Sylvia's brother," mused Carlisle. "The black sheep who disappeared before I knew her. . . . It was like you, Louis, to think of her and for her and protect her in every way." His pleasant voice was a trifle husky, as he glanced up at the black sky. "If she ever knows——"

"There's no reason why she should ever know," interrupted Hood, hastily. "It would do no good. He died, to her, a long time ago, and there's no point in opening old wounds. I went in Friday morning to see her—to assure her that there was no danger for me, and I've talked with her, over the 'phone, several times since. I told her that it was only a tragic and unfortunate accident that the newspapers were making political capital of, and I'm sure she's quite satisfied with my explanation."

"Have you seen to-night's papers?" asked Peter, quickly. "There's a picture of Walter Brown in most of them, and a good likeness, too, considering."

"Oh, good God!" said Hood, bitterly, "Couldn't they let the poor boy rest in peace, at last? He was through with the world when he came to me, and I have no doubt that he would have been glad of his release. Why is it necessary——" He broke off, and covered his face with his hand.

"If Sylvia recognizes the portrait," said Carlisle, softly, "she'll know why you—she'll appreciate——" He looked across at Clancy. "I told you, Peter, that Louis was the best man—that he deserved to win her." He touched Hood on the shoulder. "Brace up, old man," he continued, gently. "She'll take it standing, and it's best she should know the truth."

The lights of Morrisville shone, close at hand, upon the dark bosom of the night. There was a short silence as they rolled swiftly through the almost empty streets. It remained unbroken until they drew up before the green light of Police Headquarters.

Together the three young men sought and found Inspector Winkle. He was pacing up and down the bare room impatiently, his hard blue cap on his head and his fat, thick hands clasped behind his back.

"What's this I hear, young feller?"

The inspector stopped short at sight of Peter Clancy.

"What's this I hear?" he repeated, with curt incredulity. "They say you've got the whole case

piped. Of course, it's damned nonsense! How could you——"

"Well, anyway, I have, Inspector," interrupted Peter, crisply, and with such an air of conviction that the old man's glance took on an extra degree of sharpness. "I know why the murder was committed, how it was committed, and whom it was committed by. All I want of you is to come and help me get the guilty party, and some little bunch of glory for yourself, by the same token."

The inspector's glance softened just perceptibly. "You seem mighty cock-sure, young man," he said, grudgingly. "If you lead me off on a wild-goose chase——"

"There's no wild goose in it, though it may be a helluf a chase, at that," said Peter, quickly. "And there's no time to be lost. I have reason to believe that our bird (who's anything but a goose, you can bet your life) will get wise to something any minute, and the sooner we sprinkle salt on his tail the better. As it is, we have lost him completely, for the time being, though we know where he started from, and we think we know where he'll show up next. Have you got the warrant ready?"

"Yes," said Inspector Winkle, slowly taking fire from Peter's hurried words. "It's all ready, except for the man's name. Mr. Hood said he couldn't give it to me over the 'phone; that you'd told him not to."

"No," said Peter, briefly. He did not wish to let the inspector know that he was afraid Winkle might, to use his own words, "ball things up" without him; that he might, perhaps, proceed by himself. "It's not good medicine to say too much over the 'phone," he explained. "You never can tell who might be listening in."

"I understand all that," said the inspector, impatiently tapping his desk. "But come across with it now. If you really know," he added, tauntingly.

Without a glance at Inspector Winkle, Peter picked up a folded paper from the desk, and opening it, ran his eye over the contents.

He nodded his head slowly and laid the open paper again upon the desk. He pointed with his finger to a blank space.

"Write it yourself, Inspector, for the greater glory——" he said.

The inspector seated himself at the desk, dipped a pen in the ink, and looked up at Clancy's cheerfully freckled young face with a curiosity which he could not dissemble.

"The name," said Peter, quietly, after a short pause, "the name is—Robert Kent."

CHAPTER XVII

The Storm Gathers

DARK night, hot and black, with a breathless suspense in the still air, as of some terrific force imminent and menacing, yet held in check by a restrained and quiet fury greater than its own.

Unheeding the threat of storm, a long, low car sped swiftly eastward with a resistless rush that never wavered nor slackened, save when the lights of a town ran by in smooth and companionable sequence, when its pace slowed, for a space, until the open country was gained once more, and on it went, looking far ahead with its great burning eyes, into the blackness of the night.

Inside the car four men sat, drawn close together by the tense interest of the problem which was being expounded to them by one of their number. Carlisle, who was driving, never took his eyes from the road, but he listened as intently as the rest. Louis Hood sat beside him, half turned upon the cushions, while Inspector Winkle and Clancy leaned forward from the rear seat, so that Clancy's words were distinctly audible to all above the sound of the motor.

"That's what she says," said Clancy, finishing an account of his two interviews with Viola Gale, "and in view of the circumstances, I believe she's telling the exact truth. Whether or not we can bring her to confess in court that it was Robert Kent who took her to Fern Hills that night remains to be seen. It would be the simplest way for us, but we can get a conviction without her, I'm sure. However, we'll hope for the best. It'll depend largely on how much she really cares for him. I couldn't quite make out—— She's a real sporting little proposition, and I find Kent has been backing her in this big movie they're staging at New Rochambeau. She may stand pat—and then the evidence will be mostly circumstantial. In which case, we will at least be able to clear the public mind of all suspicion of you, Hood, even if we can't send the damned scoundrel to the chair."

"Then I hope it will come out that way," said Hood, gravely.

"Good God!" exclaimed Peter, hotly. "Do you realize that Kent planned your death in cold blood? He had no idea that Walter Brown was in existence. He'd taken precious good care, by getting your servants out of the way, to leave you alone in the house, so there'd be no possibility of getting the wrong man. He had planned it to the last detail. He'd lived in your house, hadn't he?—and knew every inch of the grounds. I'll bet your present

caretakers were left in the house when you rented it to Kent's sister. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Hood, "John and Eliza stayed with them while we were abroad."

"So he probably knew enough about them to be aware of the fact that their daughter was playing in 'The Wishing Stile'?"

"Yes," said Hood at once. "Yes. I happen to know that there can be no doubt about that."

"He would have been sure, then, of just what they'd do when they got the tickets."

"Unquestionably."

"All right, then. The coast was clear, as far as he knew. He'd found out, some days ago, about our proposed fishing trip, and that you were to have dinner with Harry."

Hood nodded, and said:

"Yes. I saw him Monday—and he suggested that he'd like to go along."

"Right again. Then he fixed it so Harry would invite him to his house. Dinner was at seven. Therefore, he knew that you'd leave your house a few minutes before. You told him what your plan was—to stop at your house, change to your fishing clothes, get your tackle, and walk over to Hood's to dinner. You told Kent all that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Hood admitted. "In fact, he asked me quite a lot of questions: about where he should meet me, and so forth. Thought we might go out on the

train together. Afterwards, he 'phoned me he'd decided to drive out in his own car."

"You see how it all fits in," said Peter. "How exactly he knew what your movements were expected to be. What train you would take. Where you'd be almost any given minute. And then, Walter Brown steps in—and all his calculations went to the winds. Though he didn't know it till afterward."

"But, Peter," objected Carlisle, "he was at my house at seven, or a very little after."

"A very little after is right, son," said Peter, definitely. "It wasn't but a few minutes after, I admit, but a fast car can hit it up, and as a matter of fact, he did go over to Lounsberry, after he'd pulled the trick, and turned up at your house early enough so that no one noticed, particularly, that he was late. He had to change after dinner, you remember, but we naturally thought that he was too conventional to want to dine, as we did, in our old clothes. In reality, he couldn't have gotten to your house in time. He had other fish to fry."

"God!" groaned Carlisle. "To think that we should have sat at the table with—and Mother—— Damn him, I think I hate him worse for that, almost, than anything else!"

"But, say," broke in Inspector Winkle, whose heavy body was bouncing about uncomfortably, owing to his position of strained attention, "I don't

see that you're making out such a hell of a case against Kent, so far, young feller. Maybe he did know all you say, but what of it? What would be his motive?"

"He's terribly in debt, for one thing," replied Peter, calmly. "O'Malley found that out and a lot of other things for me. Kent's a born gambler and has lost heavily lately—thousands and thousands—enough to make you and me nervous just to think about it. He went with a pretty swift and expensive bunch and was a game loser, but I guess, even at that, they got his goat finally. . . . And then there's that movie venture on top of all. That's run into money, and then some! He's already in for fifty thousand, and not a chance to get a *sou marqué* out of it for months. He's strained his credit to the limit in the hope that it would go big, as it probably will, with Viola Gale as the star. . . . If he could only have held out, don't you see? That's the point. He had to have money, and damned quick at that! He's borrowed from everybody in sight. How about it, Harry? Didn't he get something out of you?"

"Well, yes," admitted Carlisle, with a shrug. "I suppose it may have been for this motion-picture thing, though he didn't say so. He put up a long story about—well, it was a long story and a good one, and he got the money he was after."

"To save a big block of stock he'd bought on

margin?" asked Hood. "That was the story he told me."

Peter glanced up quickly.

"Oh, he touched you, too, Hood, did he? I thought as much. Gave you notes, perhaps?"

Hood nodded.

"And they were due——?"

"Next week."

"You see," said Peter. "God knows how many more were falling due about the same time. O'Malley traced up some, and probably would have located more if he'd had the time. Kent owes all his credit would stand at the bank, and they're beginning to get very nervous. Oh, there's no doubt about it. He *had* to have money."

"But, I don't see——" began the inspector. . . .

"Why he picked on Hood when Hood was only one of a lot of creditors?" Peter interpreted Winkle's thought. "Well, there were a bunch of reasons. In the first place, and going pretty strong, was the fact that he didn't love Mr. Hood—not any! They've followed, to a certain extent, the same lines, and Mr. Hood has beaten him, hands down, at every turn. That's right, Harry, isn't it? I got it from you."

"Sure thing," answered Carlisle, briefly.

"Kent's being talked of as a possible candidate for district attorney in the fall," Peter proceeded, "but so is Mr. Hood, and what chance did Kent have

against him, do you think? And that isn't the only way they're rivals, as you might say. I don't know when it began——"

"Oh, long ago," said Louis Hood, wearily, bitterly. "I don't know how it came about, exactly. . . . We were classmates in college, and somehow—— Well, everything seemed to come my way. I was much stronger, physically, than he, and always made the college teams when I wanted to. . . . He tried hard, but the only time he ever came anywhere near, he was ruled out on a foul. It was unlucky for me that I happened not to be playing that day and was acting as umpire. I remember it only too well. It was only a practice game . . . but he came to me afterward, and—there was a scene that I'd be glad to forget." He paused, and added heavily: "He told me then that he'd get me some day——"

"Yes," objected Winkle, "but that was so long ago——"

"Humph," grunted Peter. "Well, the fight to be district attorney isn't so long ago. That's present—and future. . . . And then . . . more than that, if you must know, they're both in love with the same young lady. (You'll excuse my mentioning it, Mr. Hood. It's necessary to make the situation complete.) I said," he turned back to the inspector, "that they're both in love with her, but I'm not so sure of Kent. There was another reason for his wanting to marry her. You must remember

his desperate need of money—and the young lady, as it happens, has oodles of it in her own right. There was no one else in the running but Mr. Hood, and with him out of the way——" Peter shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands, leaving the conclusion to Inspector Winkle's keen powers of deduction.

The old man nodded grudgingly.

"All right, so far," he said, "but——"

"You want more?" asked Peter, grinning. "Well, there's another little item to add to the list, and when you've done that, I think you'll admit that the total is pretty nearly sufficient, with a man like Kent, even for such a beastly crime. Just make a note of the items on your cuff. They were rivals, bitter rivals from boyhood, though I guess most of the bitterness was on Kent's side. Kent hated Mr. Hood because Hood beat him every way from the beginning. Kent knew that he was likely to beat him in his political ambitions, and almost sure to in his—er—matrimonial—if Hood wasn't, somehow, put out of the race. . . . Then there was the pressing need for money—— He might, after all, fail to win the young lady and her fortune, but——" Peter paused. "But there was a big trump up his sleeve—and you add this to the rest, Inspector, and see what you get."

Another pause. Winkle leaned forward expectantly.

"Richard Kent and Louis Hood are cousins," Peter went, on impressively. "Only distant cousins, at that, but, now mark this down—at the present moment, Kent happens to be next of kin. That information is correct, isn't it, Hood?"

Louis Hood nodded, and the inspector drew a deep breath.

"Now I suspect, in the circumstances," Peter addressed himself to Louis Hood, "that you were waiting to make a will until—well, until the matter of your marriage was settled one way or the other—that if you had previously made a will, your mother was the chief beneficiary—that your mother, having died, made the will of no effect—and that Robert Kent was on to all these facts." He peered closely into the face before him.

Hood hesitated slightly.

"It is a natural inference, and happens to be true as far as my own part is concerned. As to Kent—I've been wondering. . . . He knows my personal stenographer, my secretary, you might call her. . . . How well, I can't be quite sure, but I rather thought, lately, perhaps very well indeed. . . ."

"Then you have thought of Kent," interjected Peter. "I wondered if you might not have suspected him——"

"The thought crossed my mind," admitted Hood, "but I put it away from me. You see I knew the facts you've just brought out—could imagine a

motive, possibly—if the circumstances had been different. It's been a terrible puzzle. If I had been killed instead of poor Walter. . . ."

"But, unquestionably, you were to have been the victim," insisted Peter.

"You certainly make it appear so," said Louis Hood, slowly. "Yes, in view of all the facts, I think there can be no shadow of doubt."

"And you think, with me, that Kent's prime motive was that he wanted your money, which, in the present circumstances, he was bound to inherit," persisted Peter.

"Yes," answered Hood, reluctantly. "I think it could hardly fail to be the case. Mrs. Fayle, being only his half sister, is no blood connection of mine. He's the nearest relative I have in the world. That's the reason why I can't help hoping, in spite of everything—— We're of the same blood, after all."

"Good Lord, I don't see that it matters!" exclaimed Harry, furiously. "We're all of the same blood, if you go back to Adam. But when I think of his sitting at the table with my mother——" Words failed him.

"Well, that's a good layout of motives, as far as that goes," persisted the inspector, "but how in hell was the job pulled off? That's what I want to know. If the body wasn't dropped from an aeroplane——"

Peter grinned to himself in the darkness, but answered seriously, "That was a clever theory of

yours, Inspector, but it doesn't happen to fit this case."

"How can you be so cock-sure, Clancy?" objected Winkle, irritably. The road over which they were passing was under repair and this fact did not add to the inspector's comfort.

"Because," replied Peter, quietly, "the evidence doesn't point that way. And besides, I *know*, as I told you, just how the murder was committed, and I can produce the weapon."

"The weapon!" ejaculated the inspector. "Why, aside from Brown's pistol, the only weapon there was, I found myself."

"Hm-m, yes," said Peter, "Mr. Hood's knife, you mean. Well, that was thrown there by the murderer, to make it look like suicide. You see he supposed that the body was that of Mr. Hood. Kent knew damned well that there would be no trace of a struggle, no other weapon—nothing. He didn't expect that the victim's neck would be broken. All he counted on was a deep cut—enough, probably, to kill him, since he knew Mr. Hood would be wearing a low, soft collar which would afford little or no protection. If Hood had been found dead on his own doorstep, with a deep wound in his throat, and a long, sharp, open knife marked with his own initials had been found within any reasonable distance of the body—who would have had any other suspicion than that he had taken his own life?"

Harrison Carlisle shuddered as he bent low over the wheel watching the road ahead, as it dropped away in long, steep curves toward the lamp-spangled blackness of the North River.

"Horrible! horrible!" he muttered to himself, his foot mechanically increasing the pressure of the brakes. "Good old Louis——"

Peter could see the dim outline of Hood's face against the reflected light from the great lamps of the car. It was stern and quiet, and he said no word.

Winkle spoke again, in the heavy darkness of the car. His voice was as unmusical and persistent as a buzzing gnat.

"Very good, then," he said, "if the knife don't mean any more than that, suppose you tell us about this weapon you say you can produce, though where in hell you found it is more than I can imagine."

"I guess that's the truth," said Peter. "I don't believe many people could imagine where I found it."

"Well, for Heaven's sake where was it?" asked the inspector, impatiently.

"In Robert Kent's tackle bag," replied Peter, quietly.

CHAPTER XVIII

"First Catch Your Hare"

BY ALL that's holy, you can't mean that, Peter!" exclaimed Carlisle.

They were within sight of the ferry, and taking his place in the intermittently moving line of waiting cars and trucks, he swung half round on the seat to look Clancy in the face.

"In Rob's tackle box!" he repeated, wonderingly. "Why, there was nothing in the box but the regular stuff—hooks, flies, spoons, reels, leaders, and such things. I don't remember seeing a knife of any kind."

"No, there wasn't any knife," said Peter, "and yet, the weapon with which the murder was committed was there—and I took it away with me, in my pocket."

The line of trucks moved slowly forward and Carlisle kept his place, moving slowly forward with them.

"It was your mother's bunch of keys that did the trick," continued Peter, in a low voice. "If it hadn't been for her it's probable that I never would have suspected Kent, though I knew, last night, just how

the trick was pulled. The evidence of what means had been used was so carefully concealed that Kent could have had no fear of leaving it in a locked box in your house, especially as he had reason to think that I had no connection with the case and was following him into town by the next train. It was about the safest place he could leave it until he had a chance to destroy it."

Peter craned his head through the open window of the car and looked longingly toward the rapidly filling ferry boat.

"Afraid we're not going to make this trip," he said, anxiously, "and Kent's almost sure to have discovered already. He got to Fern Hills at six, to-night, you said, Harry, and left there around half-past? It's nearly nine now. He's had a lot of time. It wouldn't take him more than an hour and a half to drive in. That would get him to his apartment around eight."

"Yes," said Carlisle. "He told Mother that he would get home in time for dinner, and would rather drive in before it got too dark. He apologized all over the place for leaving his things there, and for not stopping, and took his traps and his car, and left. I didn't come in till just after he'd gone."

"Did Mrs. Carlisle tell him that we'd opened his tackle box?" asked Peter, quickly.

"Yes, she would, of course," replied Carlisle, uneasily. "She explained about my lot of rotten lead-

ers. She had no idea—— Does it matter much, Peter? Will he know——"

"The minute he got a chance to open his tackle box, he must have guessed." Peter bit his lip and again glanced toward the ferry entrance. "We're not going to make this trip, that's sure. Damn it!" he said. "But never mind, Harry, O'Malley's on the job and he'll take care of it as well as I could, or better." He turned to include Hood and the inspector. "My partner, O'Malley, is watching Kent's apartment himself," he explained, "and he sent a man around to all the garages in the neighbourhood to find out where Kent keeps his car. The man will watch there, and let us know. By George, I think we're going to make this boat, after all! Hey, you, there!" Peter called, and leaping from the car dashed over to the man who was directing the position of the vans and trucks on the deck of the ferry boat.

"How many more can you get on, old scout?" he called, cheerfully.

"Three more, and that's the limit," was the laconic reply.

Peter turned and counted back. "One—two—three." The fourth vehicle in line was the car of Harrison Carlisle.

Without an instant's hesitation Peter approached the driver of the third, which was a large truck, laden with barrels. He spoke to the man at the wheel, and

after a few quick sentences put his hand in his pocket, drew out a roll of bills, peeled off several, slipped them into the man's hand, and ran back to his friends.

"Shoot ahead of this next truck, Harrison," he said, breathlessly, jumping to the running board. "It's O. K."

"Hey! Get back on the line, there, you!" shouted the man on the deck, angrily, as the car swung forward.

"It's all right, Bo," called the truck driver, "I give him my place. Get ahead, you blokes, and don't take none o' his lip," he added, cordially, to Peter.

Carlisle's car rolled gently over the planks which joined the ferry boat to the slip, the clashing chain was drawn across the deck, the planks were hauled away, and slowly the great lumbering boat steamed out into the darkness of the gently heaving river.

"Thank God for that," said Peter, as he slipped back into his place and closed the car door. "Saves us twenty minutes, and that may mean all the difference."

The inspector's brows were wrinkled in puzzled thought.

"Look here, Clancy," he said, grasping Peter's arm and shaking it a little in his impatience, "I've been racking my brain, and I can't think—— What the devil kind of a weapon was it? And how——"

"Yes, Peter, what was it?" echoed Harrison, turning on the front seat. And his mind, delivered from the exigencies of the road, bent its whole force on the question in hand.

"I'm entirely in the dark, still," said Louis Hood, shaking his head. "Are you ready to tell us, Clancy? If you are, it would be a great relief." He took off his soft felt hat, and with a characteristic gesture passed his hand over his forehead, and ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair.

"I'm ready to tell you the whole story, Hood," said Peter, quietly. "The case is complete, in my mind. The inspector will have to hear it, anyway, and Harry has been in it from the beginning—so——" He paused and looked out over the river.

They were at the very rear of the boat, and the swish and swirl of the churning waters in its wake formed a liquid accompaniment to the drum-like throb of the engines. All the motors of the trucks and vans had been shut off, and there was silence on the decks broken only by an occasional rough word from one truckman to another. There were few passengers crossing at this time of night, and the rear passenger decks, faintly lit, were empty.

Beyond the slowly, resistlessly moving boat, the broad, black waters of the noble river rose and fell with an almost imperceptible motion. Along the western shore the receding points of light which marked the ferry landing grew smaller and smaller in

the distance, while the necklace of pale lamps at the top of the Palisades seemed suspended in mid air. Above, black, sullen clouds rolled in, unseen.

"So," continued Peter, after a breath, "I'll tell you the whole story of what happened Thursday night, and you can see for yourselves if there are any holes in the case. This is a hell of a long ferry and I'll have plenty of time."

He shifted his position to bring his head closer to those in the front seat, and spoke in a low, guarded voice.

"It was your caretaker, John, who put the match to the fuse, Hood," he began. "I think some possibility of such an explanation had been beating around in my old bean, but it didn't come through until old John told us about his banshee. Do you remember?"

"Yes." Hood leaned still farther forward, looking at Peter in bewilderment.

"Old John told us," explained Peter, to the inspector, "that he'd heard a banshee wailing around Mr. Hood's house all night, the night before the murder; that it didn't stop until the wind died, at dawn. His wife heard it, too. They couldn't sleep. They'd never heard anything like it before, though they'd listened to many high winds in the trees around the house on many a windier night. He described it as a voice without words. Does that suggest anything to you?"

The inspector, who had a good deal of Irish blood in his veins, shivered a little, and cast a quick look, sidewise, into the darkness.

"I—I can't say that it does," he said, hesitatingly. "Of course, warnings like that are all nonsense. But it was queer, wasn't it? What do you make of it, Clancy? Was it imagination, or——"

"Did you ever hear of an Æolian harp, Inspector?" Peter asked, quietly.

"I've heard of the Æolian Company. They're on Forty-second Street," said the inspector, surprised at the irrelevance of Clancy's question, but willing to show his urban knowledge. "I know they make pipe-organs and pianolas and such things, but I never heard they made harps."

"Well, they don't make the kind I'm speaking of," said Peter, suppressing a grin. "It's something altogether different."

"Made of wires and hung up in trees, as a rule," interjected Hood, swiftly, "but, Clancy, why should——"

"Another thing, Inspector," said Peter, with a slight motion of his hand toward Louis Hood, "did you ever run into a clothes line in the dark?"

Winkle gazed at Peter as if he thought the young detective had suddenly taken leave of his senses, but Carlisle whirled clean around in his seat and grabbed Peter's shoulder.

"Why, I did once, Peter!" he cried, excitedly.

"Don't you remember? It was at school, and we were sneaking in after hours. I ran into it, full tilt, and cut a big piece out of the bridge of my nose. I've got the scar yet. Good God! Do you mean——"

"I mean," said Peter, slowly, "that the banshee John heard was a sort of Æolian harp, that it played only when the wind was high, and that it was made of two fine wires stretched tight from one tree to another across the front of the terrace at Hood's house. The marks on the trees are plain, showing just where the wire was attached, and where it cut the bark as it ran across it. It was so fine that it could scarcely have been seen in the daytime, and it would have been fairly impossible to have seen it at dusk. The whole beastly plan was perfected, in every detail, beforehand. Kent went out Wednesday, probably early in the evening, and strung the wires. He knew that the caretakers were unlikely to come around that part of the house, when the whole main house was closed up and empty. He set his trap and went back to town."

Peter paused and for an instant there was no sound but the throb of the steadily heaving engine and the swirl of the black water.

"He knew all of Hood's plans," Peter went on, "days before, and could make his calculations exactly. It was necessary, you see, for him to have an accomplice. He must insure, not only that his

victim would come down off the terrace by the middle steps leading to the lawn, where the trap was set, but that he should come in a hurry. If he had been walking, and struck the wire, it probably wouldn't do much damage. He must come at top speed. You see that, don't you?"

There was a stir of acquiescence in the tense figures about him, but no one spoke.

"That's where Viola Gale came in," said Peter, still in the same low tone. "Kent knew Hood's character—knew that he was brave and chivalrous—knew that if he heard a woman screaming in terror that he'd beat it to the place as if all hell was after him. What he didn't know, and what saved Hood's life, as sure as we're sitting here, was that there was another man in the house, a man of about Hood's height and figure, a man to whom, by a strange coincidence, the voice of Viola Gale was a voice from the past—perhaps not fully recognized—who can tell? But a voice which made an irresistible appeal —as we know."

Again Peter stopped. The inspector's deep rough breathing sounded heavily in the silence as he mentally laboured in the wake of the quicker mind.

"I'm certain," continued Peter, "that it will be proved that Viola Gale was completely taken in by Kent's hoax and was entirely innocent of any real complicity. It was just a sporting proposition to her. She was under obligations to Kent, on account

of the movie venture they were in together and was probably glad to do something to please him. She thought it was all a lark. She's that kind, as I size her up. He probably explained his leaving her at the station to go back to town alone, by saying that he had a dinner engagement with the suppositional person who had just settled the bet, and who, she understood, lived in the neighbourhood. He did keep his engagement, almost on time, as we know, but it was with you, Harry, not with the sporting gentleman, who never existed."

Carlisle nodded.

"But I can't quite see," said Louis Hood, keeping his intent gaze fixed on Peter's face, "the exact sequence of events. Walter had said good-bye," he spoke slowly, thinking back, "and was opening the door, when I switched off the light and went into the north wing. Exactly what happened then, do you think?"

"I don't think," replied Peter, confidently. "I am certain of what happened. You will bear in mind that Kent had his wires stretched the night before. You were expected to leave the house a little before seven. All right. He and Viola Gale drove out to your place by back roads as far as possible. They got there in plenty of time. They both left the car at the southwest corner of your place, and he pointed out where she was to go, alongside the south boundary, until she came opposite the

house and could see the entrance. Kent had described you to her, though he'd given you a fictitious name. She was to wait until she saw you at the door, and then was to scream in as scared a way as possible, to attract your attention. She was an actress and could be depended on to do the business in a convincing manner. That she did so there is one man living who can testify—old Bill Brown."

"Bill Brown?" asked Hood, in surprise. "What has he to do with it?"

Then Peter and Harrison Carlisle explained their meeting with the old poacher which had proved so momentous in its consequences.

"I see," said Hood, "but to go back—I want to have it quite clear in my own mind—— The woman stood beyond the wall, at the foot of the lawn, and then——"

"And then," continued, Peter, "Walter Brown came to the door. It was quite dark outside, but there was a bright light in your hall and the top half of the door is glass. Viola Gale had a good look at Walter Brown before you switched off the light. She was too far off to distinguish features, but he answered well enough to Kent's description. He was about your build, unusually tall, and dressed much as you would have been in your fishing clothes. Kent didn't see him at all, though he was much nearer the house than she. He was stationed in the shrubbery, over by the west end of the terrace, and

those tall, pointed evergreens, that grow along the front, cut off his view completely. But, he didn't have to see, you understand? He waited there, in the dark, for her signal—waited, with who knows what jealousy and hatred, what thwarted ambition, what greed of your wealth in his heart. He heard the signal—a frightful scream of terror from the woman, down by the road. Running feet, almost soundless on the snow—the thrill and quiver of the taut wire—a heavy fall—and silence."

Peter drew a long breath.

"The plan had worked. But, unknown to Kent, it was Walter Brown who came through the door and started toward the drive, when he was stopped by that awful scream. Without an instant's hesitation, he turned and ran back across the terrace toward the spot where the noise had come from. In midcareer, as he sprang down the steps, that cruel wire, taut as a bow-string, caught him in the throat. Caught him as he jumped, and with such force that the bones of his neck snapped like a dead branch."

"My God!" groaned Carlisle under his breath, "and it might have been Louis, with all his big clean life ended—lost! And Sylvia——"

"After that," Peter was saying, "Kent had nothing to do but reel in his line."

Harrison's ear caught the familiar words.

"Reel in his line, Peter? Reel in——"

"Yes," Clancy said, quietly. "He wanted to get

in the wires in the quickest way possible. There was, in fact, only one, continuous wire, as I can show you. It was hooked around a low branch of that pine tree, where we stood yesterday morning, Harry, near the west end of the terrace. It was passed up over a limb high enough to clear any man's head, carried across to the east end, thrown over another high limb on the tree opposite, brought under a lower branch of the same tree, carried back across the terrace, at the exact height to catch a six-foot man, either in the face or neck, and fastened securely to the pine tree from which it started. Is that clear?"

Even the inspector was able to follow the explanation.

"That wire," Peter went on, "was fastened to a big, multiple-action tarpon reel. When the end, ready to his hand, was freed, Kent had only to reel the entire wire in. It took not more than a few seconds at the most, though the springy wire wouldn't run in as well as an ordinary line. And when he had done that, practically every trace of the means he had used had disappeared. It was damned clever! He'd even tied a length of ordinary line on the end of the wire, enough to cover it when the whole thing was reeled in. It was only chance, perhaps," Peter spoke, slowly, "that gave Mrs. Carlisle the means to, and reason for, opening that tackle box. . . . Chance or luck, that I was so much interested in a kind of reel I had never seen; that in

handling that particular one I spun the handle, as one naturally does, and the spring of the wire underneath helped in unwinding the line that covered it; that I should have found the wire sticky, with a queer kind of gum, when I was already certain that a wire had been used and knew that one end of it had been fastened to a pine tree. It didn't take long to put two and two together, and when I had the whole wire examined by the best analytic chemists in town, and they reported traces of human blood—very little, but enough for them to be sure—no further evidence was needed to my mind, and I think it's enough to convince any jury, with what we'll be able to get out of Viola Gale."

The heavy bump of the ferry boat as it slid into the slip startled them all, so filled had they been with the excitement of the moment.

"That's all very well—very clever and ingenious, Mr. Peter Clancy," growled the inspector in Peter's ear, as all the motors aboard the ferry boat started at once. "Your theory seems to be sound as far as any one can see, but you haven't got your man yet, Mr. Peter Clancy, and he's sure to be wise by now. First catch your hare, my lad," and then with emphasis, "first—catch—your—hare."

CHAPTER XIX

The Storm Breaks

AS SOON as they were clear of the press around the ferry slip, Peter, accompanied by the now alert and eager inspector, sought the nearest telephone booth, and called the night clerk in his own office.

He found that O'Malley had sent in several reports through Lannegan, the man who had been detailed to locate the garage where Kent kept his car. This had easily been done, and Lannegan had telephoned from the Empire Garage while waiting for said car to put in an appearance. It was only a short block from Kent's apartment, and it had been an easy matter for Lannegan to slip over at intervals without losing sight of the brightly lit garage entrance, and have a word with his chief, who was stationed in front of the apartment. O'Malley had instructed him to send in word to the office that Kent had not yet come home, according to the elevator-boy and Kent's own servants, and O'Malley felt certain they were telling the truth. The last report was sent in at 8:45. At that time Kent was still missing.

"There's still a chance that he may have come in by this time, at that," said Peter to Winkle, glancing

at his watch as he hurried back to the waiting motor. "It's now 9:23, and a lot can happen in a half hour in this old burg. Why, where's Hood?" he broke off as he opened the car door and saw no one but Carlisle sitting at the wheel.

"Hope you and the inspector won't mind," replied Harrison at once, "but old Louis has ducked. Said he couldn't be of any assistance to you, and didn't care to be in at the death. Gad! I don't feel that way, damn him! The cold-blooded coward. When I think that he sat at Mother's table the night he—— Oh, hop in, Peter, and let's be off. We're wasting time."

"You don't mind Louis beating it, do you, Peter?" Carlisle added in a lower voice as Clancy took his place beside him on the front seat. "He wanted to get to Sylvia as soon as he could in case she recognized the picture of her brother in the paper to-night. He wanted to explain it all, and set her mind at rest, poor girl. Between you and me, Peter, I can't be sorry that a poor unlucky devil like Walter Farquhar got out of this hole of a mortal world by a quick and painless road. But that doesn't help Kent out any. He was aiming at the decentest, whitest chap I know, and the sooner you catch up to him and let him have what's coming, the better."

Talking half to himself, half to Peter, Harrison guided the car swiftly in the direction indicated by his companion, and in a very short time they drew

up in a shadowy spot alongside the railings of Gramercy Park.

Peter leapt lightly out before the car came to a standstill, and went quietly and swiftly along the pavement until he came to the corner of the railing, and saw across the roadway the lighted front of a handsome apartment house. Here he stopped and whistled softly, a low note, one higher in the scale, and then two low notes together.

At the signal, a bulky figure detached itself from the railings and came quietly toward him.

"Nothing doing yet, Peter," said O'Malley's gruff voice in his ear. "No sign of our clever friend, and there's no back way in or out of the apartments. Saw Lannegan not two minutes ago. Kent's car hasn't shown up at the garage. I'm getting kind of restless, Peter. This is a devil of a long time for him to have taken driving in from Jersey. What do you say we go up and talk to the servants, and see if we can't start something. I haven't seen anybody but his man so far. Just went up as a friend to see if Mr. Kent was home, you understand. Didn't want to start anything till you came."

"All right," said Peter, crisply. "The cat's out of the bag as far as Kent's concerned by this time, I'm certain, and we may as well find out what we can, here. I'll get Winkle, and we'll put the servants through the third degree. We may get a lead that will help."

A few minutes later Clancy and O'Malley, backed by the inspector's imposing blue bulk, were putting questions to Kent's frightened valet.

They ascertained without much difficulty that Kent had been expected home to dinner at eight; that shortly before that hour—the valet was too much upset by Winkle's portentous stare to remember the exact time—Kent had 'phoned that his car had broken down on the road, and that he wouldn't be in till late. The friend who had been engaged to dine with him was much annoyed at the excuse, it appeared, and had gone off, fuming.

The valet told of the circumstances with so much detail, and he was so obviously frightened, that there was little reason to doubt his word.

The three were just about to take themselves off, much to the servant's relief, when the young, red-headed one turned back, and asked suddenly:

"Have any 'phone calls come in for Mr. Kent during the evening?"

"Why, yes, sir," said the valet, rubbing his long, thin hands nervously together. "There've been several calls during the evening."

"Who from, do you know?" asked Peter, pleasantly.

His manner was so mild in comparison with that of the uniformed officer, that the valet plucked up a little heart of grace.

"One was from Mr. Rosenbaum," he answered,

readily, "he's managing the big movie production at New Rochambeau. He wanted to know——"

"Never mind him, who were the other calls from?" Peter interposed, quickly.

"The rest were all from a lady—the same lady, I think," replied the man. "I don't know who it was, but she seemed a bit anxious to get in touch with Mr. Kent. She asked that he should call her as soon as he came in."

"You have her 'phone number, then?"

"Yes, sir, here it is," and he took a folded slip from his pocket: "Bryant 6543."

"Got a 'phone directory handy?" asked Peter, making a mental note of the number.

"Yes, sir, here you are, sir."

Peter ran through the pages rapidly and handed the book back to the waiting servant.

"Thank you," he said, cheerfully. "Now tell me something else. When Mr. Kent 'phoned, did you remember to give him the lady's message?"

"Certainly, sir, of course," said the man with a touch of dignity.

"Good," said Peter, clapping him on the shoulder. "You're on the job, I see. Right-o. 'Night!"

And without more words Peter hurried his two companions out into the hall, and down into the street, breaking into a run when he reached the pavement, leaving the two older men considerably in the rear.

"To the Wayside Theatre, Harry!" panted Peter, "pick up O'Malley and the inspector at the corner as you go. They're just behind me—see 'em? No time to lose!"

Quick as thought, Carlisle let in the clutch and the car jumped eagerly forward, as if it, too, longed to run down the prey.

"Stage door just beyond the main entrance," said Peter as they swung into Forty —— Street, and saw the flashing, triumphant lights of "The Wishing Stile" pulsating against the black and empty sky. "Drive on slowly. Rawlins'll be waiting somewhere along here."

Obediently, the car slowed down to a crawl, and as soon as they were out of the glare of lights, Peter leaned from the open window and whistled his clear, low call.

He waited a minute, while the car slid silently along, then whistled again and yet again. But no shadow detached itself from the shadows of the house fronts.

"Damn funny," growled O'Malley, from the back seat. "Rawlins's instructions were plain. He wasn't to take any chances. I wonder——"

At Peter's direction the car had turned and, drifting slowly back, had nearly reached the main entrance of the theatre, when a man dashed out of the stage door, and looked wildly to the right and left.

"There he is!" cried Peter, eagerly.

At the same instant Harry jammed on the brakes, and Peter whistled again.

With a look of alarm and anxiety slightly tinged with relief, the man rushed to the car and leaped in at the door, which O'Malley had already opened for him.

"What's the trouble, Rawlins?" O'Malley's voice was gruff and uneasy. "Where's Miss Gale, and why——"

"She's gone!" cried Rawlins, apprehensively. "Made clean off, while I——"

"Gone!" echoed Peter. "In the middle of the show! Good lord! How did it happen that you let her give you the slip? Confound it, man! You should have——"

"Easy, Peter," cautioned O'Malley. "Let's hear what the lad has to say. Post mortems later. Now Rawlins——"

"I found out where she's gone, though," cried Rawlins, eager to extenuate a fault which he knew would be considered vital. "She's gone home in her own car."

"To her apartment, or out in the country?" asked Peter, quickly.

"Her country house," answered Rawlins, confidently. "Got it out of the doorman with the help of a fat tip. Chauffeur was grumbling about the long drive with the storm coming up. That's how he knew it wasn't her apartment. Apartment's near by, you know."

"She didn't give the direction in the hearing of the doorman, then?"

"No, but I don't think there's any mistake. The place is somewhere up in Westchester, not very far out."

"Fulham?"

"The doorman didn't know the name of the place." Rawlins's tone was regretfully apologetic. "But I thought, perhaps, you or Captain O'Malley——"

"Know the road to Fulham, Harry?" Peter cut in, turning quickly to Carlisle.

"Like my own driveway," answered Harrison, with satisfying assurance. "Used to be in love with a girl up there."

"Then beat it!" cried Peter. "On your way! And forget the speed laws—only, for God's sake, don't get pinched."

Instantly the great whir of the engine drowned his voice. Smoothly the gears shifted from first, to second, to third. The voice of the car sank to a deep steady note, and the swiftest run of Peter's life, which had never been characterized by slowness, began.

"What's the idea, Clancy?" growled Inspector Winkle, as they swung into Fifth Avenue. "I thought it was the man we were after. What's this actress got to do with——"

"She's been 'phoning Kent ever since I left her. Bryant 6543's number of the Wayside Theatre.

They got in touch soon after Kent's valet delivered her message. She cuts out in the middle of the show. Inference plain. They're meeting somewhere. Find her—find him—see?" explained Peter, tersely. "She may not go to Fulham at all, of course, but it is the best bet for the time being. I've been to her apartment. They wouldn't go there. May be a million places where they might meet, but I'm putting my money on Fulham, for the time being, see? And the sooner we get there, the sooner we'll know."

"How in hell did she give you the slip like that, Rawlins?" broke in O'Malley, angrily. "I thought you'd been long enough in the business not to be fooled by a woman."

"Well, Captain, you see," began Rawlins, defensively, "I kept her in my eye, as you might say, till I saw her landed at the theatre. And then, somehow, confound it all, it didn't come into my thick old bean that she wasn't safe till the show was over. So I just thought I'd take a peek at her from the front. Seemed just as good a way of watching her as any. And they say 'The Wishing Stile' is a peach of a show. Anyway, I took a stand-up seat and saw her in the first act, all right. I didn't suspicion anything, and I was close by the door," still more defensively. "I went out into the street and watched till the second act was called, and she didn't come out then."

"Of course not, you fool," grunted O'Malley. "Take's some time to change into street clothes. Well, go on."

"I had a pair of opera glasses," Rawlins continued, obediently, "and I had 'em trained on her when she came on in the second act, which was some time after the act started, see? And at first I was almost fooled myself, the other girl done so well, and looked so much like her, but in a minute or two I got wise and then you couldn't have seen me for the dust, beating it around to the stage door."

"And you were too late, of course."

"Yes," sadly, "she'd just gone. The doorman told me she'd been taken ill during the performance and had to go home. I'd just wormed the rest out of him and was on my way to 'phone the office when I seen you."

"Well, I guess that'll be about all from you, Rawlins. I think we can manage to dispense with your services about now," said O'Malley, with pointed sarcasm. "If you'll slow up a bit, Mr. Carlisle, we'll let Rawlins go home and go to bed where he can continue his sleep."

Harrison slowed down at once, and before the car came to a stop Rawlins, glad to escape, sprang out.

"Miss Gale can't have such a devil of a long start," said Peter with relief as the car sped on. "We may pick her up on the road and trail her home. Her

car's one you can hardly miss. I've seen it, ridden in it, in fact." He grinned slightly. "It's a kind of bright violet colour all over, even the inside cushions and things. We may see it any minute. If we're on the right road," he added, uneasily.

The road, right or wrong, was smooth as a billiard-table, shining dark blue in the lights of the park through which they were at that moment passing at hair-raising speed. At this mid-theatre time of night the way was practically clear, and the "traffic cops" mindful of the intelligent law that a man may drive as fast as he likes so long as he does not jeopardize others, let them pass without interference.

The storm which had been brewing in hot and angry silence all through the evening now gave hints of its coming fury. The sky, which had appeared low-hung, empty, and black, was now riven by sharp swords of blinding light. The wind was rising in deep, sighing exhalations. In the lightning flash, with the speed of a camera-shutter, were revealed high-flung masses of cloud, lurid and awful, towering into the zenith, the tense stillness of the lower air making their swift progress across the sky a thing of mystery and menace.

Then the rain began to fall. It came on the first downward sweep of wind and struck the slender, flying car with the force of an intentional and well-aimed blow.

It was the work of a second to close the wind shield

and the windows, and the car sped on without an instant's slackening of its whirling pace.

"*Some* night! I'll tell the world," said Peter, leaning forward.

Harrison Carlisle nodded quietly, keeping his cool glance fixed on the road ahead. With marvellous skill he carried on, slowing for curves to prevent skidding, and picking up again with a celerity which did equal justice to his skill and the flexibility of his engine.

At the Harlem Bridge he stopped for an instant at Peter's direction while Peter dashed out in the rain to speak to the policeman, who, in streaming poncho, guarded the approach.

"All right, so far," said Peter, slamming the door, and shaking big drops of water all about him as he dropped into his seat. "The violet car passed here just before the rain commenced."

The car was already in motion. The lights of the little river flashed by and were gone. More lights, then dark and silent country, which seemed desolate and uninhabited except when the sharp, sudden flashes showed great houses of large estates sheltering themselves among the distant trees.

On again and ever on. Villages flew by with a dazzling, swimming blur of lights. The roar of the wind and the heaving boom of the thunder drowned the voice of the motor, silenced the splashing whirr of the wheels. All other sound was swept away in the terrific onslaught of the storm.

"Coming into Fulham here," said Carlisle at last. His voice was as calm and unruffled as if the black night were broad day. Only a slight deepening of its pitch showed that he had any emotion to conceal. "Where do we go first?"

"To the police station," said Peter, promptly. "We've got to pick up a cop to make the actual arrest, in case we find our man where I think he is. Got to be prepared. Jersey warrant not enough, you understand. Know where it is?"

Carlisle nodded, and a moment later drew up before a neat, white-trimmed brick building where a green light winked in a blur through the rain.

Peter and the inspector went in together, reappearing in an incredibly short time with a man in uniform.

"Get in in front, will you, Officer," said Peter, "and direct the way.'"

"Gad, I'm glad we had sense enough to let Carlisle bring us in from Fern Hills instead of taking the train," he muttered to O'Malley as he slipped in beside his partner. "I don't believe another man in the world would have brought us along at the pace we came."

"He's some little driver," admitted O'Malley, "but I'll bet my hair, what there is of it, won't lie down for a week."

"Me, too," growled the inspector. "Talk about being snatched from the jaws of death, I've been in

'and out of 'em so many times in the last hour that I know the shape of all its front teeth."

Peter was not listening. He had slid forward on the middle of the seat and, leaning on the back of the one in front, peered anxiously ahead.

"Great storm we've had out here to-night," the Fulham officer was saying to Carlisle, "done lots of damage. Think it's letting up a bit now, though. Turn right here, and right again at the next corner but one. Miss Gale's house is at the top of the hill, facing the end of the road. Backs up on the old Forest estate. Fine place. Empty now."

"Forest estate?" said Carlisle, quickly. "Why, I know that place. Some friends of mine lived just below there on the Boston Post Road where the New Rochambeau trolley runs. Used to visit them a lot."

"That's the place," said the officer. "Miss Gale's house is just to the west, this side. Turn here. There it is."

"Slow down, Harry," said Peter, sharply, "and let's see. Oh, here—drive in through this gate and keep your lights on. Nobody likely to run into you. And we can't afford to leave the car in the road. You can stay here where it's dry and look out that nobody steals it. It's no good your——"

"Oh, to hell with the car!" said Carlisle, feelingly. "Do you think I'm going to miss——"

"Come on, then," said Peter, smiling grimly. "It's not going to be any picnic."

The car had stopped in a private drive where it was hidden from the road. Silently its occupants descended and, unmindful of the heavy rain which beat into their faces, filed quietly out into the road.

CHAPTER XX

The Curtain Falls

"NO USE the whole bunch coming any nearer till I've had a peek," said Peter, stopping his companions just inside the gate of the house at the top of the hill. "Get in there in the bushes, and wait till I come back."

So sure was Peter Clancy of himself that no one, not even Inspector Winkle, questioned his right of leadership. Noiselessly the four men slipped in among the wet shrubbery, and Peter disappeared. In a moment he returned, breathless but elated.

"He's there! God! I was right, O'Malley!" he panted. "He's there with her. In the living room. Right off the main hall. Saw them through a crack in the shutters. She's no more sick than I am—and furious—mad—— He's. . . . But come on, and for God's sake keep quiet."

"Spread out now," Peter whispered, "and you, Winkle, go round to the back. It's just possible he may make a break that way. The rest of you get out of sight. I'm going to the door alone. Don't get too far away, and run in if you hear me whistle."

A nod of understanding and the four figures melted into the rain.

With a long breath, Peter went up the walk alone and softly ascended the steps. He paused an instant with his clenched hand uplifted and then quietly touched the bell.

Absolute silence ensued. Had it not been for the light which filtered through the soft silk curtains of the side lights of the door it would have seemed that the house was empty.

But Peter knew better. Again he pressed the bell.

After a moment he heard a door open at the back of the house, and a heavy footstep approaching. It stopped, however, and Peter, straining his ears, thought he detected the sound of low voices. He would have given worlds to see what was going on inside the house, but there was here no loophole for observation. The curtains at the side covered the small panes closely and the key was in the lock.

It seemed a year to his impatience before the heavy footsteps sounded again and the door was opened a very little way. A tall darky in a white coat stood in the lighted crack, his bulk completely filling it.

"Evenin', suh," said the man, with the courtesy of his race, but with a trace of trepidation in his eyes.

"I want to see Miss Gale on some very important

business," said Peter, smiling blandly. "Will you give her my card?"

"Miss Gale's in New York," said the darky, readily. "She's playin' to-night and won't be home twell late. Ahm sorry, suh. Hit sho' is one wet night t'be out in." And he made as though to close the door.

Peter's manner changed instantly, and before the man could realize what had happened he was looking into the round steel blue eye of a business-like automatic.

"Stand out of the way," said Peter, in a fierce whisper, "stand back, or . . ."

But he got no further. There came a bull-like roar from the darkness behind the house:

"Damn you! I. . . . God!"

It was Winkle's voice. Peter recognized it, guessed like a flash what had happened, and with a shout, dashed madly around the house, beating through the bushes, driving deep into flower beds, soft and muddy with the rain, panting, straining to reach the voice which was leading him into the blinding, splashing blackness.

Behind him, all attempt at concealment scattered to the wild winds, came the others. For a second a white flash of lightning showed as in a picture a broad garden with grass walks, and beyond it a low stone wall. A small, slender man, bare headed, his clothes streaming with wet, was upon the top of it

and behind was Inspector Winkle running forward with all his might.

The man leaped down and darkness closed in again, blacker than ever after the glare.

Peter was conscious that Winkle was scrambling over the wall as he leaped it, that Harry was calling, close behind—even made out the words: "Making for the trolley! Look out!" And all the while his senses were straining through the wild darkness for the sound of feet ahead.

Suddenly he was aware of the great bulk of a dark and silent house on his right. Then he heard the footsteps of his quarry crashing and stumbling on the uneven gravel of an unkempt drive. So clear was Peter's mind, in spite of his mad pace through the blinding storm, that he was distinctly conscious of the thought that Kent must be utterly panic-stricken to stick to the road instead of hiding somewhere, since it was obvious that he knew the surroundings, and letting the chase go by.

The drive dropped down the hill and Peter ran on the rough grass beside it the better to hear the feet ahead. He was gaining. They sounded perceptibly nearer now, still fleeing for life itself. There was confession of guilt, abject and incontrovertible in every crashing footfall.

Far outdistancing the others, Peter came on, nearer and still nearer. His prey was close ahead, but Peter could see nothing.

"Stop, Kent!" he shouted, and his voice sounded distinct and awful above the roar of the storm. "I'll get you dead or alive! Stop, or I'll fire!"

Still the pounding crash on the gravel showed that Kent's pace had not slackened.

It was useless to fire at an unseen target and Peter, redoubling his speed, closed up the distance between them. In passing, he grazed his arm on a great stone gatepost and suddenly the crashing footsteps ceased. Peter stopped at once, holding his breath.

There was not a sound, not the faintest movement in the storm-swept blackness ahead.

Peter crept noiselessly forward and felt the firm smooth stones of a street pavement under his feet.

Again he listened. Not a sound except the quick and cautious breathing of someone who followed close behind.

Peter, crouching and listening, felt a fumbling touch on his shoulder and Carlisle's voice whispered in his ear:

"Where——?"

Reaching gropingly back, Peter put his hand over Harrison's mouth.

"He'll move in a minute," thought Peter, "and he must be close by." And clutching his friend's arm they crouched silently beside the walk, and waited. A moment—two. Then came a slitting crash of lightning which lit the world, down to the tiny blades of grass.

Carlisle, with a cry of exultation and an oath, sprang forward, but Peter caught him bodily in his arms and hurled him back.

"Don't touch him! My God, don't touch him!" yelled Peter, wildly. "It's death! It's death! Don't you see?"

A great roar as of the thundering voice of God drowned his words. And upon its passing another flash followed close, lighting the storm-lashed countryside.

Across the road, a broad, thick wood appeared stretching away into the distance. Near at hand the heavy limb of a great tree, torn and rent by the storm, had fallen outward and, half caught in midair by overhead trolley wires, lay across a line of gleaming rails, which slid smoothly off to right and left. Directly upon the track crouched or drooped the figure of a man. One foot was on the rail, the other on the grass. He was leaning slightly forward, his whole body tensely contracted as though for a spring—but still—horribly, frightfully still.

The whole picture was clear for an instant to their wild, startled gaze. Then it flashed out and vanished in the roaring darkness.

"Sagging overhead wire, brought down by the falling tree," breathed Peter, awesomely. "Sagging electric wire fully charged. If you'd touched him, Harry, it would have gotten you, too. Made a contact and gone through you like a stroke of lightning.

God!" It was almost a sob. "The sagging wire caught him in full flight as he was making for the woods. . . . Hanging there . . . and dead . . . Dead . . . 'Vengeance is mine. I will. . . . .' It was taken out of our hands." Peter turned and caught his friend's arm in a grip that bit to the bone. "It was the wire that caught him, do you see?" said he, in a slow, odd voice. "A wire! And that was his end. . . . As though it had been thought out—planned . . . from the beginning. Somewhere it says—and it's true, God, it's true!"—his voice dropped and gravely, fatefully, he repeated the words—"'they that take the sword shall perish with the sword'."

* * * * * * *

The dawn was breaking as Peter Clancy, white and tired, looked up from a sheaf of pages, filled with his neat, clear writing, and across the desk at Harrison Carlisle, who had shared his vigil and had assisted him somewhat in his labours. "That's the whole story, and I think it's clear," said Peter, wearily. "I'll send it to the *Meteor* by messenger, and it'll be in the morning edition. Ought to make me more solid there than ever. It's some scoop, I'll tell the world!"

He ran his hand through his shock of red hair, which was already sticking up almost to its fullest extent, and sighed wearily.

"I think nobody can have any lingering doubts about Hood after this," he said, meditatively. "I've gone as easy with Miss Gale as possible, and it sure will give her publicity, and then some; so she ought to be satisfied. I've given most of the honour to our friend Inspector Winkle; so he ought to be happy. . . . But it's myself, old chap, myself," said Peter, with a flash of his old smile, "who's able to write at the end of this problem—'Q. E. D'."

THE END